The Impact of Graduate Assistantships on the Preparation of Early Career Student Affairs Professionals

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The Impact of Graduate Assistantships on the Preparation of Early Career Student Affairs Professionals

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The study included 10 participants who had all graduated with a master’s in higher education within the past 5 years, had participated in a graduate assistantship within student affairs, and worked full-time within a student affairs department at the time of the study. Each participant took part in a one-on-one interview that was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for themes. I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis to reveal eight themes: (1) Generalist Approach of the Academic Program; (2) Relationships with Faculty; (3) Value of Internships; (4) Graduate Assistants being Treated as Professionals; (5) Departments Allowing Graduate Assistants Autonomy; (6) Meaningful Connection Between the Program and the Assistantship; (7) Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship; and (8) Significance of Professional Development. The findings showed that there was a meaningful connection between the academic program and the graduate assistantship; however, the transfer of knowledge was mostly limited to the student development theory and the legal perspectives courses. The study participants perceived internships as one of the most valuable parts of the academic program that gave them the opportunity to explore and gain skills in different student affairs areas outside of their assistantship. Professional development also proved to be significant for the participants not only for developing skills but also for building networks and support systems. Finally, the study participants identified keystone projects and experiences that allowed them to show autonomy and take ownership as the most vital aspects of their assistantships. These opportunities gave them confidence in themselves and had a positive outcome on their transition to a full-time
position. The recommendations for future research and practice highlighted the importance of building a strong collaboration between the academic program and the graduate assistantships, developing a consistent and cohesive training for graduate assistants across student affairs departments, and allowing more autonomy and ownership in the assistantship experiences.
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A huge thank you to the ten participants that took time out of their busy schedules as student affairs professionals to help me finish this project. Without your experiences and impactful answers this accomplishment would not have been possible. I look forward to seeing what differences you all make as new professionals in student affairs.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my student affairs colleagues who make a difference in student’s lives every day.
Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family who never gave up on me and continued to push me to finish. My husband Stephen who was always there to proofread, but most importantly never let me give-up because there were plenty of times I wanted to give-up. My son Matthew and daughter Caroline for always knowing you can accomplish any goal and never stop chasing your dreams.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

Many universities in the United States have a division of student affairs that have provided students “outside the classroom” experiences ranging from living in a residence hall, becoming a student leader on-campus, participating in career counseling, or dealing with students in crisis. There are a variety of programs, departments, or services that may fall under a typical umbrella of student affairs, such as housing/residential life, student activities/leadership, civic engagement/service learning, new student/parent programs, health/counseling, and career development just to name a few. These departments employ full-time staff members, most of whom have earned a master’s degree and even completed programs with a graduate assistantship as a requirement. However, the question that always remained is whether or not these staff members are prepared to serve undergraduate students through delivering services, helping through problems, and coordinating meaningful events.

Graduate assistants are commonplace on many U.S. campuses. These graduate students provide support to departments as they pursue their master’s degrees. In return many assistantships include tuition waivers or lower tuition costs, a monthly stipend, and professional development opportunities (Flora, 2007). A graduate assistantship is often a requirement for higher education graduate preparation programs in order for the graduate students to attain a theory-to-practice experience (Creamer & Winston, 2002). There is a high importance placed on these assistantships since the expectation is that many central skills are being learned during these assistantship experiences and not necessarily within the academic program. These assistantships allow a student to gain invaluable experiences that may include running meetings, creating and submitting budgets, advising students individually and in groups, administrative
tasks, and being a part of a departmental team (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Many departments in student affairs have graduate assistants as a vital part of the success of the departmental strategic plans, goal setting, and coordinating programs. Even with the significance and the commonplace of the graduate assistant role within the field of student affairs, there is limited research on the experiences of these graduate students and the impact of these experiences on their success as new professionals.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2019) stated that students completing a master’s degree in a higher education/student affairs preparation program should not only acquire skills and knowledge, they should also be socialized into the field of student affairs. Much of the literature showed the viewpoints of upper level student affairs administrators observing the competencies of early career student affairs professionals and not from the view point of the new professionals themselves (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Ostroth, 1981). This study attempted to address this gap in the literature and explored the graduate assistantship experience and its relation to socialization and preparation for a first position in student affairs.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The stories of these early career student affairs professionals may inform faculty of higher education leadership programs along with all levels of student affairs administrators, including chief student affairs officers (CSAOs), mid-level student affairs officers (MSAOs), and senior student affairs officers (SSAOS) on how to decrease
the gap between academics (graduate preparation program) and practice (graduate assistantship/internships).

**Research Questions**

The review of literature regarding the graduate assistantship experience within the student affairs field yielded the basis for the following research questions that guided this study:

1. How did graduate students build connections between the graduate assistantship experience and the master’s degree program?
2. What role did graduate assistantship experiences play in the preparation for the first full-time position of early career student affairs professionals?
3. What knowledge and skills did early career student affairs professionals gain in their graduate assistantships during their master’s program?

**Limitations**

There are several limitations about the study. First, the study was limited to only successful graduates from the higher education administration program at one public 4-year research institution in the Mid-South. Students who left the program at some point during their graduate studies were not included. Additionally, only graduates who worked as graduate assistants in the division of student affairs were selected. Therefore, the results have limited transferability to other types of institutions, other graduate programs, or assistantships outside of student affairs.

**Significance of the Study**

Student affairs is an ever-changing field and must be as unique as the students that it serves. The early focus of student affairs concentrated on student development and career guidance (Long, 2012), but the field has grown into a multifaceted profession requiring
professionals to be knowledgeable and proficient in many different skills, including supervising others, understanding of diverse populations, making ethical decisions, performing assessment projects, and budgeting (Herdlein, Kline, Boquard, & Haddad, 2010). The study contributes to the understanding of the importance of the student affairs graduate assistantship experience in the training and development of the necessary skills needed to become a successful early career student affairs professional. Many new professionals in student affairs feel no connection between what they learned in graduate school and their first-time job (Kinser, 1993). It is common for graduate preparation programs in higher education to use a dual training model of academic coursework with parallel fieldwork (CAS, 2012; Kuk & Cuytjet, 2009). There is a need for more research in connecting the academic graduate program with the graduate assistantship that helps students get socialized into the field of student affairs.

Socialization is a key component of a successful transition into a new role in student affairs. Much of the research on graduate preparation programs has focused on the curriculum as the place for professional socialization (Perez, 2016a). CAS (2012) stated that much of the professional socialization within student affairs has been examined in only a singular space within the course instruction of a graduate preparation program despite the fact that most preparation programs required some kind of fieldwork, including graduate assistantships. Perez (2016a) stated that much of the student affairs research concentrated on how early career student affairs professionals are managed in graduate school, but not much emphasized the workplace. Much of the burden of a successful transition from graduate school to an early career student affairs professional is largely placed on the individual. Often the success or failure of socialization of an early career student affairs professional is judged on job persistence and skills
rather than their understanding of values, beliefs, and conventions of the profession (Perez, 2016a).

An important factor for a successful transition from graduate school to the workforce is not only socialization, but skill attainment and knowledge of the essential skills needed for the new position. Skill attainment is important in the success of an early career student affairs professional. Gaining practical skills has been given less attention in research despite an emphasis on professional preparation by graduate higher education programs (Herdlein, 2004). Through the limited research regarding skill attainment there are some recognized significant skills that are needed to be successful in a new student affairs position. Some of these skills are budget, collaboration, leadership, writing ability, interpersonal skills, and working with diverse populations (Herdlein, 2004). Graduate assistantships have a vital role within the field of student affairs and it is becoming increasingly important to provide experiences where graduate students who participate in these assistantships acquire the necessary skills.

This study can provide knowledge to supervisors and faculty who are currently working with graduate assistants and help them bridge the gap between students’ academic program and practical experience. This study can also give a clear understanding of graduate assistants’ perceptions about the most valuable aspects of their graduate assistantship experience and also highlight deficiencies in their skills. An end result of this study could be a list of best practices for the division of student affairs and graduate preparation programs to ensure that all graduate students serving in assistantship roles are prepared for the future of the ever-changing field of student affairs.
Definition of Terms

Chief student affairs officer (CSAO): a university administrator who is charged with the responsibility of leading an entire division of student affairs at an institution of higher education (Herdlein, 2004).

Graduate assistant (GA): a full-time graduate student who provides service to a college or university in exchange for a stipend and often a tuition waiver (Flora, 2007).

Graduate preparation program in higher education or student affairs: a master’s level professional preparation program that provides graduate students who will in the future enter the field of student affairs with the understanding and skills to serve undergraduate students outside the classroom and provide services, programs, and activities (CAS, 2012).

Mid-level student affairs professional (MSAO): a university employee who has obtained a graduate degree, serves in a functional area in a mid-level position, often reports to a SSAO, and has supervisory responsibilities of full-time employees (Fey & Carpenter, 1996).

New professional (early career employee): a full-time staff member who has less than five years of experience and has earned a master’s level degree from a graduate program in student affairs, college student personnel, or higher education (Cliente, Henning, Skinner, Kennedy, & Sloan, 2006).

Student affairs: a division or area of a college or university that includes a complex area of campus services, operations, and programs (Long, 2012), which are often run by professionals serving in administrative roles, advising, counseling, and management (Love, 2003).

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation
for their current position. This section first presents Perez’s (2016a) conceptual model as a guiding framework of this study followed by the discussion of the underlying theoretical concepts of socialization, sense-making, and self-authorship that inform the model.

**Model Description**

This qualitative case study is written through the lens of the conceptual model of socialization in student affairs preparation programs as presented in an article titled *A Conceptual Model of Professional Socialization within Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs* in the *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education* written by Rosemary J. Perez (2016a), a faculty member in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Author Dr. Rosemary J. Perez has given written copyright permission (See Appendix A) to use the model diagram (see Figure 1) for this qualitative study. The conceptual model of professional socialization within student affairs graduate preparation programs helps explain the importance of congruence between graduate students’ academic coursework and their graduate assistantship experience for a successful transition to the workplace.

This model signifies that graduate preparedness transpires within “intersecting cultural contexts rather than in a singular field” (Perez, 2016a, p. 43). The student affairs cultural contexts within the model include national, professional, functional area (e.g., student activities, health center, career services, etc.), institutional, and individual level social conventions (e.g., family, friends, social identity). The cultures are shown as layers or planes within the model as seen in Figure 1. Even though this conceptual model is two-dimensional, the graduate student academic coursework and graduate assistant fieldwork happen at the intersection of the identified student affairs cultural contexts (national, professional, functional area, institutional, and individual level social conventions).
Since there are different cultures within the socialization of student affairs graduate preparation, there may be some friction between the cultures and expectations. Individuals could be more drawn to one particular culture over others. For example, a graduate student may have connected more with the academic study than their functional area. It is vital to understand that early career student affairs professionals are simultaneously positioned within several cultural contexts (Perez, 2016a).

It is also important to acknowledge that graduate students in student affairs do not enter a master’s program without any knowledge of the field. More than likely, graduate students who have entered a student affairs/higher education master’s program have prior undergraduate experiences with some leadership program(s), student employment, or a particular service role. Graduate students also bring unique qualities including: values, beliefs, social identities, life histories, and skills that can influence their thoughts about the world and their interpretation of the graduate preparation program. These unique qualities are referenced as individual resources and traits within the beginning square of the model (See Figure 1).

Since most student affairs preparation programs included academic coursework along with fieldwork, including graduate assistantships and/or practicums, the hope is that both the academic coursework and fieldwork will be aligned as represented by the vertical solid arrow within the model (Figure 1). When this alignment happens between coursework and fieldwork the need for sensemaking is not initiated and the individual’s capacity for self-authorship emerges to help make meaning of their experiences. When the experiences are meaningful and make sense then the outcomes will be positive. Some positive outcomes include the knowledge of the profession’s values, professional skills and identity, accurate professional expectations,
and increased capacity for self-authorship (Perez, 2016a). This results in positive experiences for both the graduate preparation program and departments that offer graduate assistantships.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of professional socialization into student affairs within graduate preparation programs (Perez, 2016a)

The model recognizes the negative consequences when coursework and fieldwork are not aligned. When the areas of academic coursework and fieldwork are skewed, shown as the dotted vertical arrow (see Figure 1), graduate students start using sensemaking resources. The decision of choosing sensemaking resources by an individual is often mediated by the level of self-authorship, which is represented on Figure 1 by the dotted downward arrow. The helping fields research shows that there is often a possibility of inconsistencies between the academic coursework and fieldwork (Melia, 1984; Parkinson & Thompson, 1998). When students confront these inconsistencies, they can experience conflict and try to alleviate these differences.
by participating in sensemaking resources. As these students try to make logic of these inconsistencies, the sensemaking resources they draw upon may be facilitated by self-authorship. In other words, the students who are more externally influenced may draw upon diverse sensemaking resources than those who have a clearer internal base of values and beliefs from which to draw when inconsistencies emerge (Perez, 2016a). When these inconsistencies occur, the outcomes will be undesirable resulting in the possibility of attrition in the field, professional dissatisfaction, poor academic and employment performance, unrealistic expectations, and decreased capacity for self-authorship.

**Socialization**

The theory of socialization was significant within organizations of early career student affairs professionals and mentioned as part of the conceptual model. Socialization refers to the varied ways individuals become members of social groups and involves several outcomes, including attainment of rules, roles, standards, and values (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). Socialization involves attaining knowledge, skills, awareness of professional identity, and an internalization of career-oriented norms typical of the fully skilled professional (Moore, 1970). Individual experiences during professional socialization use stage models suggesting the new professional’s movement through different phases, including anticipatory, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). Early career student affairs professionals often go through stages trying to find their identity with their first full-time role and can be more successful if socialization starts during the graduate assistantship experience.

The field of student affairs has generally placed the information seeking for early career professionals on the individuals personally (Perez, 2016a). There is an insufficient understanding on how early career student affairs professionals make sense of the gaps between
expectations and experiences during graduate school and how that affects their transition to their first professional position (Perez, 2016a). The success or failure of socialization of an early career student affairs professional is based on how long they are in a particular position and not on understanding the values, beliefs, and conventions of the field (Perez, 2016a). The conceptual model of professional socialization into student affairs within graduate preparation programs can help guide the socialization of early career student affairs professionals into their new roles.

**Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is an important element in the description of the conceptual model of professional socialization within student affairs graduate preparation programs. Sensemaking is the perception of when an individual experiences differing events or surprises which cause a need for clarification (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is driven by an individual’s need to regain balance after their work is disturbed (Weick, 1993). There are seven resources individuals rely on to make sense of life situations. They are identity, retrospect, social context, salient cues, ongoing action, enactment, and plausibility. Identity refers to acknowledging organizational roles and maintaining a positive self-image. Retrospect signifies past experiences to guide current and future action. Social context refers to the relationship with others and acting in a socially appropriate way. Salient cues are a validation of how to act. Ongoing action is continued to acquired knowledge to establish next steps. Enactment refers to actually comprehending the knowledge gained. The final sensemaking resource is plausibility or an individual’s capability of producing a rational explanation for the life disturbance (Weick, 1995). The reference to sensemaking within the conceptual model (Perez, 2016a) is vital to understanding the socialization of early career student affairs professionals into their new career roles.
Sensemaking needs to be clarified specifically to the field of student affairs. Early career student affairs professionals often use retrospect as a vital part of their transition and socialization to their new roles and organizations. They rely heavily on the training from their graduate experience, including academic/classroom and assistantship/practicum, but some research has shown that these graduate experiences are inadequate in helping them negotiate the workplace (Cilente et al., 2006; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004). These inadequacies result in an emphasis on social context and cause the early career student affairs employees to become dependent or heavily rely on their supervisor or fellow colleagues (Strayhorn, 2009). It is important to continue sensemaking research on early career student affairs professionals in order to understand their socialization process and provide assistance.

**Self-Authorship**

Self-authorship is another theory within Perez’s (2016a) conceptual model of professional socialization into student affairs within graduate preparation programs. The term self-authorship is embedded within psychology through the developmental concept that individuals generate knowledge through clarification of experiences that increase in complexity over time (Piaget, 1952). Kegan (1994) extended the self-authorship thought by introducing three dimensions of development, including cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. The process is that an individual throughout life goes from being more externally driven and becomes more internally grounded. Baxter Magolda (2001) extended the theory of self-authorship to include three major phases, including external definition, the crossroads, and internal definition. These areas of psychology are significant to understand the socialization of early career student affairs professionals.
The self-authorship concept has been utilized within student affairs, but mostly with the undergraduate experience even though self-authorship progresses over an individual’s lifetime (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2001). Research has highlighted that student affairs authority figures including faculty and supervisors have great influence over early career student affairs professionals especially during their graduate experience. It is vital to understand the early career student affairs professionals’ ability for self-authorship and the reaction to their external influences during the graduate experience and within the workplace (Renn & Jessup, 2008; Tull, 2006).

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the purpose of this qualitative case study, which explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The study fills a gap in existing research and highlights the importance student affairs graduate assistantships play in developing the necessary skills of early career student affairs professionals and ensuring that they are confident and successful in their current role. Also included in the chapter is a description of the significance of the study, limitations, and definitions. The chapter ends with a discussion of the conceptual framework that informs the main concepts explored in the study, including socialization, sense making, and self-authorship.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides a literature review for the qualitative case study that explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. There was a significant amount of information found regarding the main topics of this study. The main topics identified are the history of student affairs (Hevel, 2016; Long, 2012; Thelin, 2004), graduate assistantships (Cavell, 2000; Flora, 2007; Johnson & McCarthy, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006), transition to new professional roles (Cliente et al., 2006; Renn-Jessup-Anger, 2008), and competencies for new professionals (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2010; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

To locate literature for this review, I utilized several on-line educational databases including Ebsco Academic Search Complete, ERIC ProQuest, JSTOR, and ProQuest Central through the access granted by the university library system. The keywords used were “student affairs and graduate assistantships”, “graduate assistantships in higher education”, “history of student affairs”, “competencies for student affairs new professionals”, “transition for student affairs new professionals”, and “socialization full-time position in student affairs,” and majority of the resources were found within the timeframe of 2000 – 2019. These searches resulted in a manageable number of articles and books to use for this literature review. The last search technique utilized was to examine reference lists of already located journal articles to gain additional relevant material for this research study.
Graduate Preparation Programs

Historical Context

It is important to have a brief historical view of the beginning of student affairs in order to understand the start of higher education graduate programs. The beginning of the student affairs profession was entwined with the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, defined as “in place of the parent”. This doctrine empowered many universities to closely manage students who at that time were considered immature and requiring of adult supervision (Thelin, 2004). During the colonial era, faculty served as live-in teachers and were given the charge to watch the students in the dormitories, dining halls, as well as, the classroom (Long, 2012). During the mid-1800s faculty roles changed drastically and became viewed as the trainers of the intellect. The faculty no longer had time to help with the regulation of the undergraduate student matters (Long, 2012). This change created a need for administrative roles that would concentrate on the needs and concerns of the student body.

These new administrative roles on campus were necessary in order to support the student body. The first hiring of student affairs administrators was to be principally responsible for the welfare and behavior of students. Many of the first student affairs administrators’ roles were termed Deans of Women and Deans of Men (Hevel, 2016). In the 1920s the student personnel movement started gaining notice on college campuses. Schwartz (2010) stated that the personnel movement was an effort to align individual talents with particular jobs and increased efficiency for organizations. The first roles of student affairs administrators were discipline and housing (Caple, 1998; Schwartz, 1997). There was a tension felt by many administrators on the need to follow the disciplinary rules of the university, but also serve as a mentor to the students (Bashaw, 1999; Schwartz, 2010). The roles started to expand greatly for student affairs professionals.
beyond housing and discipline to include financial aid, health/wellness, career counseling, student employment, fraternities, intramural sports, campus publications, and orientation (Herdlein, 2004; Miller & Pruitt-Logan, 2012; Schwartz, 2010). Even with the addition of much needed positions and the importance of student affairs personnel, the individuals struggled to be seen as professionals on college and university campuses.

The first steps for student affairs to become a true profession was the creation of membership organizations, conferences for administrators, and the formation of graduate preparation programs (Hevel, 2016). In 1905 the first student affairs membership organization was developed named the Conference of Deans and Advisors in State Universities (Bashaw, 1999). The deans of men were slower to organize with their organization, National Association of Deans of Men, which later became the National Association of Student Personnel (NASPA) (Hevel, 2016). In order for student affairs to continue to grow as a profession there was a need for an academic component including graduate education.

In the 1910s some deans of women attended summer session classes at Teachers College (Columbia University) even though classes did not directly focus on their work (Bashaw, 1999). In 1915 a dean of women from Nebraska organized a discussion group that resulted in Teachers College that designed graduate classes solely concentrating on deans of women (Bashaw, 1999). Almost 90% of deans of women obtained a master’s or doctoral degree, however only a few earned degrees related to student affairs/student personnel (Schwartz, 2010). The deans of men were hesitant and felt that apprenticeship was more important in preparing professionals than classroom learning (Schwartz, 2000). In the 20th century, the development of psychology regarding the development of the college student helped justify graduate preparation programs in
higher education and provided an educational foundation for the current student affairs profession (Alleman & Finnegan, 2009).

**Program Standards**

The CAS standards were first published in 1986 and included the standards for master’s in student affairs preparation programs (CAS, 2012; Ebbers & Kruempel, 1992). The CAS standards (2012) stated that all programs of study for graduate programs in higher education must contain these areas in their curriculum, (1) foundational studies (historical and philosophical knowledge of student affairs), (2) professional studies (student development theory, administration of student affairs, and student characteristics) and (3) supervised practice (practicum or internship).

The CAS standards set the expectation that there should be a supervised practice component to graduate programs, however clear guidelines were not developed on how the supervised practice experience should be evaluated by faculty and supervisors (Kuk et al., 2007). “The CAS standards do not provide learning or development outcomes for supervised practice experiences” (Young, 2019, p. 292). The CAS standards are very structural including number of hours, types of experiences, and the timing of the supervised practice experience within the curriculum (Young, 2019).

The CAS standards provide the only framework to the curriculum of a master’s of student affairs graduate program. Young and Dean (2015) conducted a study with the purpose of understanding if the CAS standards were related to graduate students mastering intended classroom learning outcomes. A questionnaire was created to include 76 learning outcomes from graduate programs. There were five areas of study identified including; student development theory, student characteristics (including effects of college on the student), individual/group
interventions, administration of student affairs, and assessment (including evaluation/research) (Young & Dean, 2015). The participants assessed their agreement to statements regarding their ability to do each learning outcome. The learning outcomes were rated using a Likert scale from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). The reliability of the questionnaire was completed using an alpha coefficient on the data after collection and the assessment was piloted with 10 doctoral students who graduated from a student affairs graduate preparation program.

The study sample was selected from programs that indicated use of the CAS standards in program development. Faculty from 11 programs were identified and invitations sent to alumni from these programs who graduated 3 to 5 years from the start of the study. There were 109 responses from 506 sent questionnaires resulting in a 21.54% response rate. The results revealed that the respondents showed low confidence in assessment/evaluation/research and individual/group interventions. The other areas of studies (student development theory, student characteristics/effects of college on students, organization/administration of student affairs) aligned with the CAS standards set for graduate preparation programs. The study determined that it is important to continue evaluating and updating the standards and program curriculum to ensure that graduate students are prepared for their roles as new professionals.

**Characteristics and Trends**

Graduation preparation programs in higher education/student affairs have shown some slight changes with students, faculty, and characteristics over the years (Underwood & Austin, 2016). Underwood and Austin (2016) performed a study to identify trends and characteristics of graduate preparation programs because of a lack of research and current descriptive data. A baseline study was completed in 2011 and a follow-up study in 2014. The instrument was an online survey that included 35 closed-ended items used to gather information from graduate
preparation programs across the country. The survey items were developed using prior studies, information found in graduate catalogs, and insights from faculty and staff experiences. Both master’s and doctoral programs were included in the study. Programs for the study were identified through using NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) and ACPA (College Student Educators International) program directories and through institutional websites. In 2011, 182 program directors were contacted and sent the online survey and in 2014, 172 program directors were contacted and sent the online survey. The response rate in 2011 was 33% (61 responses) and in 2014 the response rate was 32% (55 responses). Majority of the program directors were at large public institutions from 33 different states with an equal inclusion of urban and rural campuses.

The results of the study showed that a majority of the programs had a doctorate degree as the highest level and one third offered master’s degrees as the highest degree. There was an increase in utilizing only online application materials with less than 20% still using paper applications. Between 2011 and 2014 there was a decrease in programs requiring a research/thesis project and an increase in supervised practice and portfolios. The use of a research project to earn a doctorate degree remained the same with 12% of programs not requiring a dissertation. Master’s programs required on average 40 credit hours (2011) and 38 credit hours (2014) and doctorate programs 74 credit hours (2011) and 68 credit hours (2014). Instructional delivery methods showed a decrease of face-to-face instruction with more institutions offering a hybrid of face-to-face instruction with online classes. In 2011, 73% of the programs declared compliance with CAS standards and in 2014 that number decreased to 59%. The number of students enrolled, on average, increased by 8 students in master’s programs and 14 in doctoral programs. There were 87% more women overall than men in master’s programs
with 47% of the master’s programs having more women. Understanding and charting the characteristics and trends of students and programs in higher education is important for student affairs professionals and graduate faculty to keep the profession current and relevant to future students and faculty.

**Future Changes**

The early focus of student affairs as a profession was on student development and career guidance, but the field has grown into a multifaceted profession requiring professionals to be knowledgeable and to be life-long learners as they progress through their careers (Roberts, 2007). It is important to know that professional organizations and professional development opportunities are the training grounds for new professionals in student affairs and not just the graduate education programs (Janosik, Carpenter, & Creamer, 2006; Tull, 2011). The student affairs profession continues to evolve and has become more complex over the years. In order for student affairs professionals to be successful in this century, there are new competencies including technology and budget management that need to be mastered (Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, & Martin, 2016).

Cooper et al. (2016) reported:

> As student demographics continue to change, federal and state funding continue to decline. And state legislatures and the public continue to demand accountability measures, student affairs graduate preparation programs, in conjunction with supervising practitioners and professional associations, must continually realign themselves to meet these increasingly complex challenges. (p. 108)

As challenges increase in the profession and become more apparent, student affairs will encounter many changes with personnel, budgeting, and training. Tull and Kuk (2012) wrote that student affairs needed to add several different specialist positions including the areas of technology (including running research projects), fundraising, communications, employee
recruitment/development, professional development/continued education, and assessment. As changes continue to occur within student affairs, there needs to be more concentration on collaboration between graduate education programs, practitioners, and professional associations to determine and address skill deficiencies and the development of competencies (Tull & Kuk, 2012). It is vital to understand what skills are expected for new professionals in order to make sure student affairs is successful in the future.

**Graduate Assistantships**

**Historical Context**

A hands-on supervised training, for example an internship or a practicum, has long been a requirement in professional programs in higher education. This concept of learning by doing or a hands-on experience has been historically an element of training for many professions including student affairs in higher education (Young, 2019). As the first degrees in student affairs were granted, in the early 1900s at Teachers College and Columbia University, there was a practicum requirement that included discussing the problems that the university was facing at the time (Lloyd-Jones, 1949). The concept of supervised practice including assistantships, internships, and practicums are commonplace within many student affairs graduate preparation programs (Cooper, Suanders, Winston, Hirt, Creamer, & Janosik, 2002; Janosik, Cooper, Saunders, & Hirt, 2014; Komives, 1998). These supervised experiences allow graduate students to apply their classroom learning to real-life situations (Komives, 1998; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). The concept of graduate assistantships has been present along with coursework for an extensive time within graduate preparation programs and has served as a critical component in the success of the graduate student.
University Role

It is important to understand the concept of the graduate assistantship and its importance to higher education. Flora (2007) defines “graduate assistants (GAs) as full-time graduate students who provide service to the university in exchange for a stipend” (p. 315). Assistantships can fall into three different functional areas; teaching, research, and administrative. Assignments for the graduate assistant can vary depending on the discipline of the department, accreditation rules for the program, and the culture and regulations of the institution (Flora, 2007). In the teaching assistantship, the GA works closely with a faculty member and in some cases serves as the instructor of record for a course. These graduate students are most commonly called graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). In the United States over one-third of the pool of adjunct professors are comprised of GAs (Johnson & McCarthy, 2000). The research assistant is a graduate student working directly with a faculty member primarily on grants, publications, and laboratory experiments (Flora, 2007). These graduate students are often referred to as graduate research assistants (GRAs). The third assistantship area is the administrative area and these graduate students often work in university administrative or academic program offices to assist with recruitment activities, program evaluations, and other office duties. These graduate students are called broadly graduate assistants (GAs). GA roles in the administrative functional area are most closely connected with many assistantships within student affairs.

The graduate assistantship can be handled differently depending on the policies of the university. Most universities send an offer letter and may have a GA contract or agreement as part of the offer. This contract or agreement typically includes the assignment period, minimum eligibility requirements, requirements for progress towards a graduate degree, number of
required hours for enrollment, and requirements for satisfactory completion of a GA assignment (Flora, 2007). Under the legislation passed by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), the Resolution Regarding Graduate Scholars, Fellows, Trainees, and Assistants gives graduate students until April 15 to accept or decline an offer for an assistantship (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004). This resolution allows graduate students the time to consider several different offers and choose the program that best fits their needs.

Legal Perspective (Employee vs. Student)

Are graduate assistants viewed as students or employees? The answer may come from the concept of policy versus practice between the federal government and the university. The National Labor and Relations Board (NLRB) is a quasi-judicial board under the federal government whose membership is appointed by the President of the United States and who makes decisions concerning relationships between unions and employers in the private sector (Flora, 2007). The NLRB has the power to decide if GAs are employees of the university. Cavell (2000) states that if GAs are considered university employees they are eligible for coverage for benefits under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

The NLRA only applies to the private sector and does not apply to state universities. State universities are considered exempt from the employer definition under the NLRA. Graduate Assistants at state universities have the right to view GAs based on state labor relations policies (Cavell, 2000). Some graduate assistants have argued their right to be considered a university employee by becoming unionized through organizations, such as, American Association of University Professors, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, United Auto Workers, and the Communication Workers of America (Annunziato,
Despite the actions to form unions by GAs, the NLRB considers GAs as students not employees.

Over the years there has been activism by graduate students regarding how a university views their role. Yale University formed the Graduate Employees Student Organization (GESO) in response to stipend reductions and wanted to be represented as a collective bargaining unit by the university (Johnson & McCarthy, 2000). The NLRB changed their opinion on the role of GAs in 2000 in a case with New York University (NYU) that GAs were employees since they work under supervision of other university employees who receive compensation for their work (Flora, 2007). The decision by the NLRB was overturned 4 years later and declared that graduate students have an educational and not economic relationship with the university and are not considered university employees (Flora, 2007). This is the current standard that most universities use for the GA role today.

**Administrative Graduate Assistants**

Most of the research on GAs focuses on teaching and research GAs and not as much on administrative GAs (Flora, 2007). There are some differences that need to be recognized concerning administrative GAs. Administrative GAs work in offices and are supervised by university staff or faculty. The GAs are evaluated by their supervisors on their job responsibilities and not on their academic pursuits (Flora, 2007). Flora (2007) states: “If no communication exists between the graduate student’s academic program and the assistantship supervisor, it is easy to posit that the assistant’s employment relationship takes precedence over the educational or academic relationship” (p. 319). It is critical that both supervisor and academic advisor are able to communicate to determine learning outcomes and success indicators in both the assistantship and academics.
Since GAs within most student affairs programs are considered administrative, communication is a key factor in working with these graduate students and preparing them to become new professionals. Graduate assistantships are a vital part of a university campus and especially student affairs graduate education. Administrators should examine legal, cultural, and university environments to make necessary changes in supervising, managing, and monitoring these positions (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Clear changes with guidelines for supervisors of graduate assistantships should lead to an overall positive experience for the graduate student.

**Significance of Program Coursework and Assistantship**

Research shows that professional identity for early career student affairs professionals is gained through the graduate assistantships, internships, and practicums (Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, & Pasquesi, 2015; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Young (2019) described the importance of supervised practice experience for graduates of student affairs graduate preparation programs. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of learning that was gained from the student affairs supervised practice experiences or graduate assistantships (Young, 2019). The study sample consisted of alumni from student affairs graduate preparation programs across the country with the alumni having graduated within 5 years or fewer from the time of the study. A survey developed by the researcher titled CAS Supervised Practice Outcomes instrument was used with the participants. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to 1,239 potential participants from 14 master’s programs and yielded 253 complete responses, a response rate of 20.4%. This survey was created to measure the learning outcomes from the supervised practice experiences and overall preparedness for professional practice (Young, 2019). The survey consisted of three sections including questions regarding the learning outcomes of the supervised practice experience, preparation for
professional practice, and demographic information. The results showed that alumni overall strongly agreed that their graduate preparation program was beneficial in helping them obtain the skills necessary to become a successful new professional. The alumni also strongly agreed that the supervised practice experience had considerable contribution to confidence and success in professional practice (Young, 2019).

Most student affairs master’s programs require classroom learning and an assistantship component. Since the classroom learning is taught by faculty and the assistantship is often supervised by a student affair’s staff member there can be conflicting thoughts on the benefit of each of the components. Research has shown that at times SSAO’s and graduate faculty can often have different views regarding what skills are the most beneficial for graduate students in the professional world (Kuk et al., 2007). Ardoin, Crandall, and Shinn (2019) conducted a study that gained the perspectives of SSAO’s on professional preparation in student affairs programs. The purpose of the study was to understand the perceptions of SSAO’s on graduate preparation programs, offer recommendations for better preparing graduate students for their new professional roles, and consider strengths/weaknesses of the program (Ardoin et al., 2019).

The study was grounded in constructivist paradigm and used qualitative research methods to explore the perceptions of the SSAOs. The sample consisted of 19 SSAOs from across the country serving at 2-year and 4-year public and private institutions of higher education. Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews each lasting a minimum of one hour. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for strengths and gaps to gain an understanding of common and different themes in the responses. Each member of the research team helped code the interviews allowing for different viewpoints and all engaged in reflexivity practices.
The results revealed that SSAOs found value in graduate preparation programs, but also noted both strengths and gaps within the program. Among the strengths were foundations of the program including student development theory, diversity, assessment, and allowing the opportunity for actual experiences of actively putting skills into practice through assistantships. All 19 SSAOs found value in students having knowledge of student development theories such as diversity, inclusion, and equity, and assessment skills such as creating, implementing, and analyzing data, as vital to becoming a successful professional. There was agreement that assistantships, internships, and practicums were beneficial to the teaching of graduate students and cohort-based models allowing networking and building of professional relationships was a strength of graduate preparation programs.

The SSAOs observed gaps in administrative components of the program including governance, decision making, budget management, and supervision. SSAOs felt that these components needed to be taught in existing graduate courses and within the graduate assistantship experience. There were gaps regarding ideal versus reality of student affairs and SSAOs spoke about early career professionals not understanding the expectations to be met, for example, working late hours, difficult discussions with students, or having to make difficult budget decisions. SSAOs felt that graduate preparation programs taught about an ideal environment that often was not the reality of what the graduate student would encounter in their first professional position. The final gap centered on the graduate student holistic development including career navigation, professional socialization, and overall workplace professionalism. In summary, the more connection between graduate preparation programs and graduate assistantships results in positive transitions into the professional field of student affairs. The combination of knowledge base (classroom) and tangible experiences (graduate assistantships)
the more prepared the graduate students will be entering the workforce with confidence, realistic expectations, and strong leadership skills.

**Graduate Student Experiences**

**Entering Student Affairs**

Student Affairs is sometimes described as the “hidden profession” (Richmond & Sherman, 1991, p. 8), and the main reason for this description is that there is no undergraduate major that leads a student to become a student affairs professional. Very few students are even aware of the field as a future career opportunity (Komives & Kuh, 1988).

Taub and McEwen (2006) conducted a study with the purpose of identifying factors on how graduate students in student affairs master’s programs made the decision to enter the student affairs profession. Three hundred currently-enrolled graduate students from 24 student affairs or higher education master’s programs participated in the study. Three fourths of the participants were women, one fourth were men, 89% identified as white and 10% as persons of color. Majority of participants were full-time students (76.3%), 54% were first-year students in the program, 33% were second-year, and 1.3% were third-year students. The participants earned undergraduate majors from a variety of areas including liberal arts (22.7%), psychology (19.7%), social sciences (12.7%), business (12.3%), and education (11.3%). Fourteen percent of the participants were employed in a student affairs professional position at the time of the study (Taub & McEwen, 2006).

The instrument used in the study was titled *Student Affairs Entry: Factors Affecting Career and Graduate Program Choice* and consisted of three parts including career choice, graduate program selection, and future plans. There were 51 items utilizing different response formats including categorical responses, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. Results showed
that 46% of participants were first aware of student affairs as a junior/senior and 27.7% after graduation. 53.4% started thinking about entering the career of student affairs as juniors/seniors and 35% after graduation. The study shows that the participants became aware of graduate programs in student affairs at different types in their undergraduate career, specifically 25.7% during their junior year, 23% during senior year, and 34.6% after graduation. The sources used by participants to gain information about student affairs varied including talking with a current student affairs employee (88.6%), involvement in student activities (82.6%), and the graduate catalog (82.2%). A main result for what attracted someone to enter the field was working on a college campus (72.7%), performing personally fulfilling work (72.0%), providing programs (57.3%), development of students (57.3%), continuing to learn in a university setting (49.0%), performing variety of job responsibilities (50.7%), and facing the challenges within the profession (35.7%). These results reveal that the path of entering the field of student affairs has not changed over the years and that the profession is still comprised of undergraduate students with varied degrees. It is important to note that as university campuses are becoming more diverse, student affairs must discover ways to attract more diverse students to enter the field.

**Socialization**

Socialization is important because it can lead to success in graduate school and in the future as a new professional. Perez (2016b) explored the transition of student affairs master’s students to graduate school. It is important to note that the theoretical framework used in Perez’s (2016b) study also includes sensemaking and self-authorship similar to the *Conceptual Model of Professional Socialization within Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs* that she later developed (Perez, 2019a). These graduate preparation programs were specifically chosen because of the intentional connections between the coursework and fieldwork (assistantships).
The sample consisted of 21 first-year graduate students from two 2-year student affairs graduate preparation programs at Midwest institutions; 16 women (76.2%), 8 students of color (38.1%), and 4 GLBTQ students (19.9%). Three longitudinal interviews were conducted to understand how participants were socialized into the graduate program and how they interpreted the socialization process (Perez, 2016b). The interviews were adapted from the Wabash National Study (WNS) (Baxter & King, 2007) with the emphasis on participants’ identification of experiences and making meaning of those experiences.

The results revealed the participants’ sensemaking of their experiences did not differ in connection to their capacity for self-authorship. The three groupings for self-authorship utilized for this study were: (1) solely external (dependence on others for guidance) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012), (2) entering crossroads (will allow others opinions to change their own opinion), and (3) leaving crossroads (confidence in their own voice) (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Across the groupings of self-authorship, the participants sensemaking occurred when choosing a graduate program, performing in classes, and interacting with a cohort of fellow students. The participants struggled when their expectations did not match their experiences, for example, when the expectations from an authority figure (faculty or supervisor) were not clear. Participants tried to make meaning of their experiences and the effects of these experiences on their view of the student affairs field. The making meaning process was very broad and caused challenges with their socialization to academic work and work environments (through their assistantships). This study gives an overall view that as participants moved through their self-authorship journey, moving towards being more internally grounded, they gained more confidence in their sensemaking of issues they were encountering during their transition to graduate school (Perez, 2016b).
New Professional Transition

Competencies

The problem concerning the competency necessary for graduates from higher education master’s programs and preparation for post college career has been an issue for 50 years (Cuyjet et al., 2009). Cuyjet et al. (2009) stated, “It is unclear whether graduate programs in student affairs have been satisfactory in preparing student affairs administrators in the rapidly changing environment of higher education” (p. 51). Some of the first higher education student affairs graduate programs agreed that counseling was an essential skill and needed to be included in the graduate program curriculum (Mueller, 1959). However, later in the early 1980s there was a suggestion that administration and practical experience were more important skills than counseling for higher education graduate students (Ostroth, 1981). The conflict between student affairs professionals needing counseling versus administration resulted in the agreement that student affairs graduates need to be knowledgeable in a broad range of skills including both counseling and administration (Cuyjet et al., 2009).

The profession of student affairs had a concern that the graduate students were not learning the necessary skills to be successful in their first year on the job (Cuyjet et al., 2009). Kinser (1993) states that many new professionals in student affairs felt no connection between what they learned in graduate school and their first full-time job. The student affairs profession has significantly changed over time causing the realization that there might be a need to revise the role of the student affairs professional and in return examine the role of student affairs graduate programs (Garland & Grace, 1993). According to Cuyjet et al. (2009), “because student affairs professionals’ practice in a variety of institutions and perform increasingly complex functions, the field may need to accept that there is not a single way to prepare
professionals, nor a definitive set of professional education standards” (p. 105). The profession of student affairs continues to become more complex causing disagreements on the most vital skills needed to become a successful new professional.

Skills

There has been much research on exploring the skills and competencies needed to become a successful professional in student affairs. Lovell and Kosten (2000) studied 30 years of research regarding necessary skills. They identified three skill themes: (a) administration and employee management, (b) student development theory awareness and connection with functional duties, and (c) character traits, such as, integrity and cooperation (Lovell & Kosten, 2000). These themes are broad, but are helpful for faculty in planning curriculum in graduate programs.

Several research studies surveyed faculty, senior student affairs officers, and mid-level managers to examine their perceptions regarding the competencies most important for successful practice of student affairs professionals. Kuk et al. (2007) found agreement on four competency areas: (a) individual practice, (b) professional knowledge, (c) goal setting along with dealing with change, and (d) managing organizations. Herdlein et al. (2010) studied faculty perceptions of learning outcomes for a successful graduate program. The results showed that faculty identified several skills most important to new professionals. The skills identified included communication (written and oral), counseling and facilitation group processes, assessment (including research methods), supervisory skills, diversity and inclusion, decision making, professional standards, budget management, leadership, and basic legal knowledge (Herdlein et al., 2010). This research lends itself to understanding competencies needed for new student affairs professionals.
Cooper et al. (2016) examined current literature to better understand the perceived skill deficiencies of new professionals entering the field of student affairs. There were six studies that were considered recent on the subject. These six studies were conducted by Cuyjet et al. (2009), Dickerson, Hoffman, Anan, Brown, Vong, and Bresciani (2011), Herdlein (2004), Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008), Waple (2006), and Young and Janosik (2007). After the review of these studies, there were seven common skill deficiencies identified, including budgeting/financial management, strategic planning, research/assessment/evaluation, legal knowledge/standards, supervision, technological competence, and institution/campus politics (Cooper et al, 2016).

After examining each of the studies separately a summary of all six was developed for this literature review. Herdlein (2004) conducted a quantitative study of 50 chief student affairs officers (CSAO) that concentrated on the preparedness of new professionals. The skills identified as low for new professionals were budgeting, research/assessment, and legal knowledge (Herdlein, 2004). Waple (2006) conducted a quantitative study surveying 430 new professionals with less than five years of experience in student affairs. This study identified skills as low importance in budget/fiscal management, strategic planning, microcomputer skills, and supervision. Young and Janosik (2007) also surveyed new professionals including 191 recent graduates of CAS compliant programs. The researchers identified two skills as needing improvement, understanding of humanism and research methods. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 90 new professionals and identified four themes that challenge new professionals including professional identity, cultural adjustment, learning orientation, and seeking advice. Cuyjet et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study including a comparison of responses by 159 new professionals and 86 supervisors. The new professionals did not feel prepared in areas of grant writing, budget/fiscal management, and supervision. The
supervisors identified the least preparation by new professionals in areas of budgeting/fiscal management, grant writing, and writing for publication. Dickerson et al. (2011) compared 99 CSAOs and 43 graduate faculty in regard to expectations of entry-level graduates. Both the faculty and CSAOs recognized three expectations with a large knowledge gap including fiscal management, legal standards, and assessment and they also identified technology with a small knowledge gap.

Overall, there were seven skill deficiencies among student affairs new professionals including: budgeting (fiscal management), institutional/campus politics, strategic planning, assessment (including research and evaluation), legal knowledge, supervision, and technological competence (Cooper et al., 2016). A qualitative content analysis approach by reviewing the content of interviews, notes, and documents from the reviewed six studies was used to determine if the identified skill deficiencies were included in student affairs/higher education graduate programs. The researchers predetermined the codes based on the seven skills identified in the literature and reviewed websites of graduate programs consisting of student affairs/higher education emphasis. The sample consisted of 136 higher education master’s programs. The curriculum was examined to determine what courses were offered and if they included any of the skills deficiencies identified by the research.

The findings revealed that 70% of programs included research, assessment, and evaluation, 62% stated courses in legal knowledge, 32% mentioned budget management, 15% included campus politics, 9% indicated supervision, 8% included technology, and 7% included strategic planning. These results revealed that student affairs new professionals were often not prepared in critical skills that are needed for a successful career post-graduation. There is a need for better connection between faculty in higher education master’s programs and supervisors of
graduate assistants to improve the experience. It is critical that student affairs graduate assistants understand the importance of these skills and learn them in the classroom as well as through their graduate assistantship experience.

**Preparation**

How prepared are new professionals within the field of student affairs? Research shows that about 15 – 20% of the student affairs staff members are master’s prepared new professionals (Cliente et al., 2006). New professionals are defined as staff members that have 5 or less years of experience and earned a master’s level degree from a graduate program in student affairs, college student personnel, or higher education. The field of student affairs garners staff from a variety of backgrounds because of the variety of undergraduate majors and varied types of institutions (Cliente et al., 2006). According to Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) there is not much concentration within master’s programs concerning the transition to a new professional position and more attention on student development and the overview of student affairs (history, theory, organization). It would seem that in order to make recent graduates successful as a new professional there needs to be some attention to the transition to a new professional position.

Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) facilitated a study on aligning student affairs and higher education curriculum with the actual needs of student affairs work. This longitudinal study included a national sample with qualitative data collection. Participants were recruited through professional associations, online listservs, and graduate program faculty. It was a year-long study that resulted in 533 usable responses from 90 participants who were first-time, full-time student affairs professionals (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). The data collection was completed
through online surveys and included an initial demographic information survey, educational background, current job description, and word response to a monthly prompt.

The results revolved around four themes: creation of a professional identity, adjusting to a new culture, sustaining a learning environment, and pursuing advice from others. The theme of creating a professional identity included areas of life balance, competence, job skills, proving oneself to others, and application of knowledge in a new work environment. Navigating a cultural adjustment was very frustrating for many respondents because they could not comprehend their work environments. Some were challenged by the cultural adjustment and were able to improve over time, while others felt lost and were left with wondering if student affairs was a good fit for them long-term. Many respondents did respond that their graduate program did not prepare them for the importance of personal fit, but they were taught about the concept of institutional culture. The idea of maintaining a learning orientation had mixed responses with some having a personal commitment to growth and continuing their graduate education experience by keeping up with higher education trends, while others struggled with self-assessment and needing approval from their supervisor. One recommendation from this theme for graduate faculty was to spend time on ways to continue to gain professional skills and best practices on gaining knowledge after graduation. The theme of gaining advice from others resulted in the respondents understanding the importance of having positive supervisors and mentors. These relationships were very beneficial for the new professionals, but also placed a great amount of pressure on these professional relationships because the new professionals were at times showing dependence on their supervisors and mentors. As the new professionals became more confident and moved through their first year, they gained more balance and became less dependent on these professional relationships.
In summary, Renn and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) study showed the difficulty for new professionals to transition from graduate student to full-time staff and from dependence to independence. The graduate student is a more dependent role with faculty being responsible for setting expectations for class and grading and supervisors of new professionals expect more autonomy and independence.

Cuyjet et al. (2009) conducted a study with the purpose to learn if entry-level professionals in student affairs felt prepared by their graduate program. The supervisors were studied to see how they felt about the preparedness of their employees. Two survey instruments were created one for new professionals that recently graduated with a master’s degree in higher education or related field and one for their supervisors. The surveys were based on the CAS (2009) standards using the guidelines for master’s level student affairs programs. Two questions were written for each competency to understand whether or not the graduate program provided knowledge on each competency and if the competency was important in their current work. A notice inviting schools to participate was placed on a listserv and 10 schools expressed interest in taking part in the study and submitted names and addresses of individuals that had completed their master’s degree in the past 3 years. A total of 325 graduates and their supervisors were contacted of whom 139 graduates and 86 supervisors responded to the survey.

The results showed that graduate students felt most confident in the area of student development and the least prepared in supervision, budget/financial management, and grant writing. Supervisors felt that the recent graduates were well versed in student development, but lacked skills in budget/financial management, grant writing, and writing for publications. There were also discrepancies between the perception of the recent graduates and their supervisors.
The recent graduates had an inflated perception of their knowledge compared to how the supervisors perceived them on the job.

A very important question regarding new professionals in student affairs is whether or not new professionals who have recently graduated with a master’s degree are ready for a full-time position. There has been limited research on the skills of early career student affairs professionals. Lovell and Kosten (2000) conducted a review of research spanning over 30 years regarding skills, knowledge, and personal traits of student affairs practitioners overall. They identified two studies, Newton and Richardson (1976) and Ostroth (1981) that related directly to new professionals. Both of these studies revealed the importance of interpersonal skills, counseling (individual/group), and the importance of working with students from diverse populations (Newton & Richardson, 1976; Ostroth, 1981).

There has been more recent research since Lovell and Kosten’s (2000) review of the previous three decades of research that included the seventies, eighties, and nineties. A study by (Herdlein, 2004) investigated the relevance of graduate programs by surveying 50 chief student affairs professionals. These chief student affairs professionals reported that the most important skills were management skills, including budget, collaboration, leadership, and writing ability. A second set of skills were human relations, including communication, interpersonal skills, empathy, and working with diverse populations. The third and final category were personal attributes including flexibility, critical thinking, and problem solving. There are many similarities among the mentioned research including human relations skills, management abilities, personal attributes, and the mention of working with diverse student populations. The noticeable skills absent from these studies were the importance of technology, knowledge of
legal issues, understanding of ethical standards, and decision-making (Burkard, Cole Ott, & Stoflet, 2005).

Burkard et al. (2005) conducted a study to identify the main skills needed to be a successful new professional in student affairs. Using the Delphi method, this study attempted to come to a consensus on the most important skills that all new professionals in entry-level positions would need in order to be successful. This task is difficult considering the varying titles, departments, and types of institutions that comprise a division of student affairs. To achieve the study purpose, the sample was randomly selected to include 300 mid-level to senior level student affairs administrators. The participants had to meet two criteria: (1) active membership in NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) and (2) a minimum title of assistant director in a student affairs department. There were three iterations of the Delphi survey used in the study and 104 participants completed all three surveys resulting in a 35% response rate.

The study found that entry-level positions in student affairs mostly involved high student contact, for example, admissions counselor, resident hall director, or student organization advisor. Several positions beyond student contact included program development and conceptualization of direct services including positions with titles of intramural coordinator, student life coordinator, and assistant director for student activities. Some positions with low student contact frequency were director of orientation, director of student activities, and union director. These positions had more direct staff supervision and direct administrative responsibilities and were the least recognized as a typical entry-level position in student affairs.

The participants identified 32 competency areas that they felt were essential to the entry-level professional with two competencies emerging as extremely important. The first
competency was personal qualities that included unique individual characteristics, such as flexibility, time management, oral and written communication, creativity, assertiveness, and problem-solving abilities. Human relations skills were the second competency that included teamwork, counseling, presentation and facilitation skills, advising, conflict mediation/resolution, supervision, and crisis management/intervention. There were three other competency categories that were narrower in focus, but still deemed important. These included administrative/management (program planning, organizational skills, and budget), research (program evaluation), and technology (computer based knowledge).

The final item was theory knowledge that entry-level professionals base their practice upon. There were 15 theories identified and 10 of those theories revolved around student development including Astin’s (1993) Theory of Student Involvement, Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Student Development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and Kohlberg’s (1984) Model of Moral Development. The second category of theory knowledge identified was related to diversity including women’s development (Gilligan, 1982) and minority identity development (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989). Psychological theories were the final category and included Erikson’s (1968) model of psychosocial development and Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy of needs.

In summary, the results of this study (Burkard et al., 2005) identified entry-level positions involving very high student contact and program development/planning. This results in a broad range of position responsibilities including direct student support, advising, mentoring, facilitation of programs, and conflict mediation.

**Professional Identity**

Professional identity has become an extremely important concept for the success of new professionals in student affairs. If the process of socialization along with developing a
professional identity do not happen within the graduate school experience it becomes more
difficult to be an effective new professional (Ibarra, 1999). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008)
believe that high attention must be given to the development of professional identity and
professionalism for graduate preparation programs and an area of interest for future research.

Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, and Boyle (2014) conducted a study to examine the
concept of professional identity as an outcome of socialization through graduate preparation
programs. The researchers designed an instrument titled Survey of Early Career Socialization in
Student Affairs with 43 items including characteristics of graduate student experience, influences
of people and experiences, and demographics. There were also three components of professional
identity used within the study including commitment, values congruence, and intellectual
investment. The instrument was sent over email to 708 student affairs new professionals, and
178 completed the survey to yield a 25% response rate. Of the total numbers of respondents,
only 148 were included in the study because these participants were enrolled in a full-time
master’s program and held a paid graduate assistantship.

The respondents gave details of the importance that their graduate program placed on
certain subjects, such as student development (83.7%), administration (51.9%), counseling
(22.0%), and other (4.9%). The graduate assistantship experience was considered very
significant for new professionals. The findings identified an important aspect of graduate
classroom training to include not only faculty, but current student affairs professionals and
graduate assistantship supervisors. Faculty should reach out to graduate assistantship supervisors
to share curriculum goals and make a better connection between coursework and assistantships.
A concerning result was that 50% of respondents reported that they were asked to work over
their contracted 20 hours which can result in new professionals entering the field with the
expectation to work over their full-time required hours. About three-quarters of the respondents held their current professional role in the same functional area as their graduate assistantship with 42% working in residence life/housing. This finding makes sense in the fact that graduate assistantships are vital part of a graduate student experience and residence life tends to have many opportunities for full-time employment. New professionals are often entering graduate school and full-time employment at institutions that are very similar to their undergraduate experience. These new professionals are not reaching out of their comfort zones and deciding to stay within personally comfortable environments for their first professional positions.

**New Professional Attrition**

Another important aspect of the research concerning new professionals in student affairs is the rate of attrition from the field within the first 5 years of employment. The attrition rate has been estimated as high as 50 – 60% within the first 5 years (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Renn and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) study reported two approaches to addressing attrition: (1) Improving supervision of new professionals and offering professional development opportunities and (2) Improving better job preparation for new professionals. Effective supervision is a key component of success for a new professional. A solid orientation (Saunders & Cooper, 2003), receiving adequate support, and understanding job expectations (Cilente et al., 2006) are concepts that can be beneficial in performing effective supervision. The difficulty with supervision is that if the new professionals come to their jobs without the knowledge of professional competencies, the supervisor is limited on facilitating the transition to the student affairs work environment (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).
Chapter Summary

In this review of the literature, I summarized research findings related to graduate education programs (historical context, standards, characteristics/trends, future changes), graduate assistantships (historical context, university role, legal perspective, administrative graduate assistants, learning), and graduate student experiences (entering student affairs, socialization). The second part of the chapter focused on new professional transition including competencies, preparation, professional identity, and attrition.

The review of the literature revealed the need for graduate education programs and department supervisors of the graduate assistants to better communicate regarding graduate students to make sure they are successful in both coursework and assistantships. There is a need for improved connection between both academic and assistantship experiences to make sure that the graduate students are learning necessary skills in both areas and that one area does not become more significant than the other. The new professional transition research revealed the need for new skills to be included in the preparation of new professionals including supervision, budget/financial management, technology, and grant/publication writing.
Chapter III: METHODS

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The study sought to answer three research questions:

1. How did graduate students build connections between the graduate assistantship experience and the master’s degree program?
2. What role did graduate assistantship experiences play in the preparation for the first full-time position of early career student affairs professionals?
3. What knowledge and skills did early career student affairs professionals gain in their graduate assistantships during their master’s program?

This chapter described the selection of the research design used in this qualitative case study, followed by sections on the selection of research site and participants, data collection procedures, qualitative trustworthiness, and data analysis techniques.

Research Design

Qualitative research was chosen as the best approach to answer the research questions for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “The overall purpose of qualitative research is to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 15). Qualitative research relies on the researcher to ask broad questions that result in data that consist of words and thoughts from participants. The researcher then analyzes the words and thoughts of the participants for themes and conducts an inquiry in a subjective manner (Creswell, 2008). There is an assumption that there is meaning in people’s life experiences and this meaning will be understood through the researcher’s own perceptions.
(Merriam, 2009). For this research study a qualitative approach was the most effective way to gain the information from the participants and hear the stories of the impact of their graduate assistantship experience on their first professional position.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that there are four characteristics that are key to understanding qualitative research. The first characteristic is that the research focus is on process, understanding, and meaning. It is vital for the information collected in a qualitative research study to be conveyed through the participants’ perspectives and not the researchers. The second characteristic is that the researcher is the primary data collector and analyzer of the data. Qualitative research is advantageous because the researchers expand on understanding through verbal and non-verbal communication, collect data immediately, and correspond with participants for accuracy. The third characteristic is an inductive process which means that the researcher collects data to develop concepts or theories instead of testing an already existing hypothesis. The final characteristic is that the end result is extremely descriptive. The information collection through qualitative research conveys information through words and pictures in a very descriptive fashion to explain what is learned about the exploration of a phenomenon. All four of these characteristics are followed throughout this study and explained in more detail within this chapter.

This qualitative research study followed a case study method as the research design. The concept of case study research has a growing reputation as an effective research method in gaining knowledge of complex issues in real world settings and has become popular within social sciences, education, health, business, and law (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Case study research helps a researcher study and understand a complex social phenomenon (Yin, 2014). There are various definitions and purposes of case study research. Merriam (1998) stated
that a case study’s purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular situation and meaning for those involved and is different from other types of qualitative research. Case studies are different from other types of qualitative research because they provide an intensive description and analysis of a singular unit or bounded system (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2008) also stated that “a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system including an activity, event, process, or individuals based on extensive data collection” (p. 476). Yin (2014) stated that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16).

This research study utilized a case study method because there was an in-depth investigation into the participants’ experiences with a set of boundaries. The boundaries for the participants’ experiences are that they have taken part in a graduate assistantship within the student affairs division and completed a higher education master’s degree program from the research site. The participants also must meet the definition of a new professional and been employed for at least one year after graduation. The extensive data collection was done through in-depth individual interviews gathering information about the graduate assistants’ experiences and the transition to their current professional role.

**Study Participants**

The setting for this study was a large public research university in the Mid-South that offered a comprehensive set of programs both on-campus and online across seven academic colleges. As of fall 2019, the institution had an undergraduate enrollment of over 23,000 students with 94 majors of study and a graduate student enrollment of over 4,000 with 79 master’s and 61 doctoral programs. There were 1,539 graduate assistantships available to
graduate students and the division of student affairs offered nearly 50 graduate assistantships within 14 different departments. The research site setting is referred to as “state university” throughout this study.

Creswell (2008) stated that qualitative research used purposeful sampling in which “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 214). In this study, I used homogenous purposeful sampling. Homogenous sampling is when “the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (Creswell, 2008, p. 216). This study included participants who completed a master’s degree in higher education and were also employed in a student affairs graduate assistantship at the state university while pursuing their master’s.

The participants for this study were individuals who had earned their master’s degrees from the higher education program from the state university within the past five years. The research study focused on higher education master’s degree students because it was important for the researcher and the state university to better understand the graduate student experience in order to improve the assistantships to aid in the transition to first full-time professional roles. The participants had been continually participating in a graduate assistantship for the duration of their master’s degree program, typically two to three years, and were employed full-time by a division of student affairs at an institution of higher education at the time of the study. The participants were removed from their graduate experience for at least one calendar year and no more than five years since graduating with their master’s degree. They had been a full-time employee at a higher education institution for at least one calendar year but no more than five years post-graduation. They could still participate in the study if they had changed positions or institutions as long as they had not been employed more than five years post-graduation. These
time requirements allowed the participants time to reflect on their graduate assistantship experience and also to gain experience as a new professional in student affairs.

**Researcher’s Role**

Qualitative researchers are not separated from the study and are critical to all aspects of the research process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I obtained a master’s degree in counseling and student personnel, not from state university, and participated in a graduate assistantship through student affairs. I was continually employed as a graduate assistant for the two years of completing my master’s degree. I have worked full-time for 25 years within the field of student affairs in the areas of university housing and student activities. I have worked full-time for 18 years within student activities at state university. During my employment at state university, I have supervised many graduate assistants throughout the years, however for the past seven years I have not directly supervised a graduate assistant. It is important to note that I have not directly supervised any of the participants in this research study.

An insider-researcher has a great understanding of the institution that would take an outside-researcher a much longer time to learn (Smyth & Holian, 2008). I have worked with many graduate assistants over the years and have a thorough understanding of the functions of the student affairs division, which I believe was advantageous for this study. I kept a self-reflective journal, mentioned later in this chapter in more detail, to describe ways to avoid personal biases.

**Data Collection**

**IRB Approval**

The first step in collecting data for this study was getting approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB protocol form was submitted and approved by the
IRB office to make the university aware that human subjects participated in the study, and that the researcher does not anticipate any foreseeable or significant risk to participants. All IRB forms are located in Appendix B and all participants were asked to sign an individual consent form before they participated in personal interviews.

**Contacting Participants**

I contacted the higher education graduate program at the state university to request the names of former students who successfully completed and received master’s degrees between the years of 2014 to 2018. Then I checked with the dean of students’ office within the division of student affairs and confirmed those who served as a graduate assistant in a student affairs department. Then, I secured current contact information of these graduates by checking with the student affairs departments, contacted the alumni association or searched their names through google. Once I obtained all the contact information, I personally contacted all possible participants, explained the study, and sent a request for participation (Appendix C) confirming their willingness to participate in the study.

**Pilot Interviews**

Prior to conducting the participant interviews, I conducted two pilot interviews with former graduate assistants who graduated from the master’s program at the state university. They were selected for pilot interviews because neither of them met full criteria for inclusion in this study as participants. The first individual was pursuing a doctoral degree at the time of the study, and the second graduate was no longer employed in higher education. Based on the feedback from the pilot interviews, I changed the order of the interview questions to improve the flow of the interview.
Participant Interviews

The study consisted of 10 participants who took part in the interview process. After pilot testing the interview protocol, I contacted all 10 participants and scheduled their interviews. I performed and recorded all interviews over Zoom by sending all participants an invitation with a date, time, and meeting code. Each interview was recorded and transcribed through use of a computer on-line transcribing software program called otter.com. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and lasted from 36 minutes to 74 minutes in length. I created an interview protocol form (Appendix C) consisting of a description of the study and a list of 16 interview questions. These interview questions explored the participants’ experiences as graduate students both in their academic program and their assistantship along with their transition to their first-time professional position. I kept a journal throughout the interview process and wrote down initial ideas and immediate reflections after the interviews.

Document Analysis

Document analysis adds meaning to qualitative case studies and helps the researcher with developing a rich description and is especially applicable to a research study of a single event, phenomenon, or program (Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998) stated, “Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p.118). Document analysis can provide context of the participants’ experiences, help with the development of interview questions, and check for accuracy and credibility of the participants’ stories (Bowen, 2009). The documents that were collected included participants’ resumes, master’s degree program curriculum, assistantship training materials, and assistantship job descriptions.
Data Analysis

I followed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) method of qualitative data analysis. Thematic analysis is becoming a valuable data analysis method and is considered just as established as other approaches including grounded theory or narrative analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The thematic analysis approach allows the researcher to recognize commonalities of participants’ stories and experiences. Thematic analysis is also a method of data analysis that allows for accessibility and flexibility.

Thematic analysis is flexible because it can be conducted in several different ways (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The three approaches are: (a) inductive versus deductive, (b) experiential versus critical orientation, and (c) essentialist versus constructionist theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I concentrated on the first approach of inductive versus deductive for this research study. The inductive approach is driven by the data collected from participants and uses codes to identify themes from the actual data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The purposes of using an inductive approach are to condense the data collected into a brief summary format, establish links between the research objectives and summary findings, and develop a structure of experiences within the collected data (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach provides a systematic set of procedures for data analysis that can produce credible results (Thomas, 2006).

There is a six phase approach to thematic analysis. The six phases are: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing
potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I utilized all six of these phases during the data analysis of this research study.

As the first step in the data analysis, I became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts from the interviews several times and taking critical notes to understand the data extensively. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that this phase is about becoming intimately familiar with the data so the researcher can discover information that is relevant to the study. The second phase of generating initial codes began the systematic phase of thematic analysis. Codes are succinct identifications of information that are relevant to the study and help answer the research questions. I created the codes after extensively reading the interview transcripts several times. After creating each code, I read through the whole transcript and researched each code separately. The third phase focused on searching for themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The basic procedure to generate themes is to combine codes that share some commonalities and develop a general theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I read through all the codes and clustered similar codes together to create a theme. For the next phase, I reviewed all the themes to make sure that they were directly related to the research questions. At the end of this phase I created a thematic map that not only revealed the different themes, but also included excerpts from the data highlighting the importance of the theme. The fifth phase focused on defining and naming themes to make sure that each theme was clearly stated and unique from other themes. In order to develop a successful thematic analysis, the researcher must create exceptional themes. The themes utilized in a thematic analysis must have a singular focus, not be repetitive, and address the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During this phase I uniquely named all the
themes and selected extracts from the transcripts for each of the themes. The final phase was centered on producing the report to “provide a compelling story” for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 67).

Data Quality and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research utilizes different methods of collection and analysis of data. These different research methods result in needing different ways of proving trustworthiness (Sandelowski, 1986). The four criteria for trustworthiness that Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

One way to prove credibility is to help ensure honesty with the participants (Shenton, 2004). Each participant should be given an opportunity to choose whether they want to take part in the study or not. This ensures that the participants that are taking part in the study are genuinely willing to take part and feel comfortable in offering data (Shenton, 2004). I contacted all the participants and explained the study in detail, described the purpose of my dissertation research, assured confidentiality to the extent allowed by law, and explained that they would have an opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy. Then I allowed the participants to ask any questions and confirmed with them their willingness to participate in the study.

Another way to prove credibility is through member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking could be the single most important aspect of credibility. Member checking allows the research participants to give immediate feedback and challenge any perceived wrong interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research participants should be able to identify their experience in the researcher’s interpretation which allows for correcting or
fine-tuning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I allowed the participants to read the transcribed notes from the interviews, confirm the accuracy of the transcription, and make any changes if needed.

**Transferability**

Transferability is whether the findings of the study can be applied to other situations. The notion of transferability is most commonly achieved in qualitative research through rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that when the participants are very invested and have a great interest in the research project along with meaningful stories and experiences will result in rich, in-depth descriptions. This study provided a considerable amount of data that were collected, analyzed, and presented in order to provide detailed information surrounding a central phenomenon. This study included quotations from participants, descriptions of interviews, demographic information of the participants, and a detailed summary of findings.

**Dependability**

Dependability is often connected with reliability or the replication of the results. Dependability can be problematic because human behavior is never static and revolves around the description of an individual’s portrayal of an experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest an audit trail to help prove dependability. An audit trail is keeping a detailed account of the methods and procedures used to carry out the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study utilized an audit trail to organize all information collected through interview transcriptions, documents, and journal entries. Keeping detailed notes allowed for increased dependability of this study.
Confirmability

Confirmability deals with the fact that the research findings are based on the participants’ accounts of their experiences and not on the researcher’s biases or points of view. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), keeping a reflexive journal during the research process allows the researchers to self-reflect about their own personal assumptions, biases, and relationship to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research study. I kept notes during and immediately after the interviews to make sure I was being neutral and staying true to the participants’ responses.

Chapter Summary

This study utilized a qualitative case study research method. This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The participants were selected using homogenous purposeful sampling and asked to participate in an interview. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis method. Trustworthiness of the study was assured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter begins with a brief summary of the study to re-introduce the purpose, research questions, design, data collection, and analysis. Then I present an overview of all the study participants and discuss the findings that revealed eight themes. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

Summary of the Study

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. In this study, I explored the following research questions:

1. How did graduate students build connections between the graduate assistantship experience and the master’s degree program?
2. What role did graduate assistantship experiences play in the preparation for the first full-time position of early career student affairs professionals?
3. What knowledge and skills did early career student affairs professionals gain in their graduate assistantships during their master’s program?

The significance of the study was to understand the importance of the student affairs graduate assistantship experience in the training and attainment of the necessary skills needed to become a successful early career student affairs professional. This qualitative study followed a case study method to explore the research questions. A case study provides an intensive description and analysis of a singular unit or bounded system (Merriam, 1998). The boundaries of this qualitative study were that all participants had graduated with a master’s degree in higher education from the state university and at the time of the study were working full-time within a
student affairs area at a higher education institution no more than five years. All the participants needed to be employed at least one year post graduation. Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews with ten participants who all met the parameters for the study. Each participant was asked 13 main questions with seven follow-up questions to gain more in-depth information (Appendix C). The interviews lasted between 36 minutes to 74 minutes, were recorded through Zoom, and transcribed through the Otter.ai application.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), which allowed the researcher to explore participants’ stories and develop commonalities among their experiences. I followed the six-step process of thematic analysis, including becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. I became familiar with the data by listening to the interviews and double checking the transcription for accuracy. I started to develop codes by writing a summary for each interview that identified key areas from each participant interview. I then organized codes into categories to create themes and gave them a name. This study revealed eight main themes: (1) Generalist Approach of the Academic Program; (2) Relationships with Faculty; (3) Value of Internships; (4) Graduate Assistants being Treated as Professionals; (5) Departments Allowing Graduate Assistants Autonomy; (6) Meaningful Connection Between the Program and the Assistantship; (7) Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship; and (8) Significance of Professional Development. As the final step, I developed a report of the themes with an in-depth description that included direct quotes and detailed information.

An incredibly important part of qualitative research is to provide trustworthiness of the data. I employed several strategies, including member checking, reflexive journaling, audit trail,
and rich thick description assisted by a document analysis. I took notes during each interview to help keep my thoughts about the topic in check and to remain unbiased during the data collection process. After each interview, I practiced reflexive journaling to not allow my past experiences or personal feelings to interfere with the data collection process. To achieve the audit trail, I kept extremely detailed notes about the data collection procedures, including communication with participants, recordings of interviews, and organization of all data.

I allowed all participants to take part in member checking by sending them the transcription of their interviews. This step allowed the participants to make any changes they felt necessary before moving to the data analysis process. Five participants responded to the member checking request and made minor changes to the transcripts, mainly correcting grammatical or spelling errors. All five sent me the corrected transcripts and confirmed that they wanted me to move forward with the information they shared in their interviews.

Additionally, I completed a document analysis to triangulate the information from the interviews and ensure an accurate description of the phenomenon. I asked the participants to send me a current resume, current job description, and any graduate assistantship training materials they might still have post-graduation. Overall, I reviewed five resumes, five job descriptions and two graduate assistantship training materials. The document analysis also allowed for a more in-depth look at the participants and their accomplishments post-graduation.

**Findings of the Study**

After conducting a detailed review of all ten participant interviews and developing a list of themes, eight themes were revealed: (1) Generalist Approach of the Academic Program; (2) Relationships with Faculty; (3) Value of Internships; (4) Graduate Assistants being Treated as Professionals; (5) Departments Allowing Graduate Assistants Autonomy; (6) Meaningful
Connection Between the Program and the Assistantship; (7) Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship; and (8) Significance of Professional Development. It is important in qualitative research to give an overview of the study participants. The participants consisted of five women and five men. Seven participants identified themselves as White/Caucasian, two as Black/African American, and one as Hispanic/Latino. All ten participants received Bachelor’s degrees in a variety of fields and were employed full-time for two to five years. Table 1 lists the demographic information for the participants followed by a more in-depth description for each participant.

Participants

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>UG Major*</th>
<th>FTE**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>3 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Org. Leadership</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Agricultural Education</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*UG = Undergraduate
**FTE = Full-time Employment

Angela is a White/Caucasian woman who graduated with her Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in June of 2017. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration and worked full-time for one semester after her undergraduate experience before starting graduate school. She has been working full-time for the past three years at a small private university. Angela completed two years as a graduate assistant in the same department at the state university. Angela felt somewhat thrown into her graduate assistantship, but felt it
helped her transition to her first full-time position because she encountered a similar experience. Angela said her first full-time position supervisor’s approach was, “You know you arrive and they say here are the things that need to get done.” However, even with the feeling of being rushed into her positions, she felt supported throughout both experiences. She has been employed in two different positions at the same university and currently holds a position within a campus programming department. Angela especially liked working with different vendors and contracts in her assistantship that allowed her to gain very specific skill sets that are helping her with her current position.

Charlie is a White/Caucasian man who graduated with his Master’s in Higher Education degree from the state university in August of 2018. He received a Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice and immediately entered graduate school after his undergraduate experience. He was hired, while still a graduate assistant, in January of his graduating semester. Charlie had a difficult time in his assistantship, dealing with crisis situations with students all the time and rarely getting an opportunity on the student development side. Even through all the crisis, Charlie stated, “I was able to connect with and impact a few students in some ways. Those are still positive experiences that solidify that I still do want to work with students.” Charlie was able to learn from the crisis situations and decided to work in the same field as his assistantship.

George is a Black/African American man who graduated with his Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in May of 2018. He earned a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work and entered graduate school immediately after his undergraduate experience. He completed almost the full two years of the graduate assistantship before applying for a full-time job and being hired in the same department the last semester before graduation. George has worked full-time for two years at two different universities, one large public university and one
large private religious affiliated university. He has held two different positions and currently holds a position within a first-year student initiatives department. George entered his graduate student experience with the goal “to really figure out [his] leadership style and supervision style.” He was able to have a unique opportunity in his graduate assistantship to work with large-scale programs as well as a small program specifically designed for first-year student leaders. It was a challenge, but George was grateful for the opportunity to learn many different skills that are beneficial for him in his position with first-year student initiatives, including transition programming.

Hannah is a Black/African American woman who graduated with her Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in June of 2015. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Professional Studies with a concentration in Organizational Leadership and immediately started graduate school after her undergraduate experience. Hannah completed a full two years as a graduate assistant in the same department at the state university. She has been working as a full-time professional for the past five years. She has been employed in two different positions at two different private universities and currently holds a position within a campus programming department. Hannah was very motivated by her undergraduate experience to enter a graduate assistantship in student affairs, “I knew that I wanted to go into a familiar area of where I had done a lot of my participation in the campus community in undergrad.” She enjoyed the master’s program and all the flexibility with electives allowing her to enroll in some classes outside of higher education, for example, business ethics and adult education.

Jack is a Hispanic/Latino man who graduated with his Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in June of 2017. He received a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and International Languages. Jack immediately entered graduate school after his undergraduate
experience. He completed a full two years as a graduate assistant at the state university in the same department. He has been working full-time for the past two years and has held one position at a large public research university. Jack currently works full-time within a multicultural department. Jack realized his love for working with underrepresented students as an undergraduate student leader where most of his experience was connected with the university’s multicultural center. He thought his graduate assistantship experience was challenging because of balancing the assistantship responsibilities, classes, and working part-time. His favorite project was working with underrepresented students and connecting them with graduate school opportunities. Jack loved the collaborative part of the project, “I remember being very active and reaching out to different departments on campus and folks in the community and engaging them with our undergraduate students.” He felt that learning how to navigate collaboration was vital in his current role working within a multicultural center.

Jennifer is a White/Caucasian woman who graduated with her Master’s degree in Higher Education from the state university in June of 2016. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Economics and worked full-time for two years in a non-higher education field after her undergraduate experience before starting graduate school. She completed the full two years of the graduate assistantship in the same department. Jennifer has worked four years in two different positions at the same large public research university. She currently works in the area of Title IX. It was very beneficial for her to stay in the same graduate assistantship role for two years. These two years gave her the opportunity to see many different sides of the programming area and allow for more in-depth learning about students. Her first full-time position out of graduate school dealt with working with a graduate student government and her assistantship
gave her direct experience to advise those students, “I was able to take what I learned as an advisor to undergraduate students and then apply that to graduate students.”

Kelly is a White/Caucasian woman who graduated with her Master’s degree in Higher Education from the research site in 2014. She started graduate school immediately after completing her Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics. Kelly completed the full two years of a graduate assistantship in the same department at the state university. She has worked full-time within a student affairs department for the past five years. Kelly is currently in her third full-time position and working at her second university. Both universities were public research universities, but one was a smaller regional state university and her current university is a large public research university. Kelly considered her graduate assistantship as a great learning experience where she was able to find her passion for revamping programs and making them better. She stated, “I realized that I had a passion for taking a program that existed but like needed some help, and really taking it to the next level.” Kelly is currently enrolled in a higher education doctoral program.

Megan is a White/Caucasian woman who graduated with her Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in June of 2016. Her undergraduate major was Communications with a minor in Marketing/Public Relations and she immediately entered graduate school after her undergraduate experience. She has been working full-time for the past three years within a student affairs department at a small public university. Megan completed a full two years as a graduate assistant in the same department at state university before leaving for a professional role within new student initiatives. She really enjoyed her graduate assistantship and felt it was a great learning experience. She stated, “I am very much a learner by doing.” So her main goal was to learn about as many different programs as possible. Her favorite part of the
assistantship was to work directly with student leaders, especially within student transition programs, which is her career today.

Michael is a White/Caucasian man who graduated with his Master’s in Higher Education from the state university in May of 2015. He earned a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and entered graduate school immediately after his undergraduate experience. He completed a year and a half of the graduate assistantship before applying and being hired in the same department the last semester before graduation. Michael has worked full-time for five years in higher education and has held two different positions at a large public research university. Michael was involved with his assistantship department since his undergraduate experience and so it was not so much of a transition to the department. His favorite project was able to see areas that needed improvement through assessment. He is very passionate about communicating results through infographics. Michael stated, “My favorite project included assessment and that really opened my mind and got me excited about assessment and led me to what I’m doing now.” Michael is currently enrolled in a higher education doctoral program.

Richard is a White/Caucasian man who graduated with his Master’s in Higher Education degree from the state university in May of 2018. He received a Bachelor’s degree in Agriculture Education. Richard worked full-time for three years after his undergraduate experience before starting graduate school. He completed a full two years as a graduate assistant at the state university in the same department. He has been working full-time for the past two years and has held two different positions. Both of the positions were in different departments at two different universities, both classified as large public research institutions. He currently works full-time within a student conduct department. Richard described his graduate experience in some negative terms, but was able to still develop many skills managing crisis situations, facilitating
difficult conversations, and working with diverse groups. He considers these skills extremely beneficial to his current position in student conduct and his future career goals. Richard stated, “I’m not on-call here, but I realize when I move-up there will be on-call duties, and I benefited from that experience and I am able to handle crisis when they arise.”

**Themes**

The extensive review of the interview transcripts revealed eight themes, including: (1) Generalist Approach of the Academic Program; (2) Relationships with Faculty; (3) Value of Internships; (4) Graduate Assistants being Treated as Professionals; (5) Departments Allowing Graduate Assistants Autonomy; (6) Meaningful Connection Between the Program and the Assistantship; (7) Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship; and (8) Significance of Professional Development. In this chapter I report on the eight themes through the participant interviews.

**Generalist Approach to the Academic Program**

The generalist approach of the academic program emerged as a theme based on participants’ recollections of conversation-based classes and diverse educational backgrounds of the entering graduate students. The participants really felt connected to the program and thought that exposure to broad subject areas was an excellent approach to their educational learning.

Angela really felt that the program was easy to enter because she knew everyone was going into the same field. Since there is not an undergraduate major in student affairs everyone studied different areas, but all came together to enter the same field. Angela liked that the program was broad and a good fit for a group of diverse graduate students:

One thing I really liked is just knowing everyone was going into the same field. So when I was an undergrad student, I was a business major and I knew I didn’t want to do business. It was just exciting. Everyone kind of has like the same framework. I felt like the program really gave a good broad overview. So that
whatever we specifically wanted to go into whether it was student affairs or just higher ed we could really just kind of have some context for how the profession got started and things like that.

It seemed very important that the academic program was able to tie in such a diverse group of students to make sure that they could understand the curriculum since they all came to the program with different experiences.

All ten participants in this study came from different undergraduate majors. Michael was able to tie his major into the decision to get his master’s degree in higher education, “I had just finished this degree in psychology and so I knew student development and student theory was going to be a big part of the program. And so I wanted to see where that would take me. I think it just made the most sense to me.”

Charlie talked about the format of the coursework in the academic program that positively affected him and prepared him for his current role. Charlie stated:

I think it [the program] prepared me very well for my current career different than you know, going through undergrad and the format. I really enjoy that you kind of get away from sitting and listening to lectures, you know, maybe lecture for 30 minutes and then the next two and half hours it’s like open conversation in the room and debating other people and really getting to pick people’s brains and not necessarily being talked at so much.

Charlie felt connected with the generalist approach of the program since he did not strongly connect with his assistantship. The academic program was made up of many different course topics that were classified as core classes, including Student Development in Higher Education, History and Philosophy in Higher Education, Legal Aspects of Higher Education, and Reflective Practices in Higher Education and Student Affairs. The program also offered a variety of electives, including Student Affairs in Higher Education, Strategic Enrollment Management, Governance and Policy Making, Diversity in Higher Education, and Non-Profit Fundraising.
The participants overall had positive comments about the courses offered and the learning outcomes that were accomplished.

**Relationships with Faculty**

The topic of faculty came up almost immediately with all the participants. Charlie thought that having faculty with diverse backgrounds and interests was beneficial. Charlie also found a strong connection with the faculty members in the program and liked the discussion format of many of his classes:

> They have the most experience and knowledge that they’re going to teach you but the communication was just fantastic. And it led to a lot of different conversations that you’re able to have and have them comfortably in a space you feel is safe to ask or anything that you’re curious about.

George felt that the faculty were all approachable and easy to talk to about class or personally about life. Michael thought it was very beneficial how the information was conveyed in class that fit his personality. He noted, “There were no tests and everything was paper based and discussion which much more suited my learning style.” Kelly had an extremely positive relationship with the faculty and the program, “I thought the faculty were really relatable. I thought that it was noticeable that they all worked together to create a cohesive program.” At the time of the study, she was pursuing her doctoral degree at a different institution and did not witness the same level of program cohesiveness as she did at the state university.

Michael enjoyed that some of the faculty members were practitioner-focused and he was able to take different classes in topics that really interested him. His enrollment management class stood out the most:

> The professor really worked with a population that I worked with and she provided a perspective that was really broad. I think it really enhanced to what I was able to do in my department and my understanding how the department fits into the big picture. I think that’s the class that helped me decide on pursuing a doctorate eventually, and so I could see the big picture and I know that there were
a lot of opportunities for me to find my own voice and to do research things I was interested within that field and it was definitely my favorite class.

Participants’ experiences were particularly meaningful in classes taught by faculty members who were also practitioners at the state university. There were a couple of current state university administrators who taught in the higher education program. Participants who took classes from them mentioned that these experiences were strengths of the program.

Kelly felt that the student development theory professor was able to design class assignments that were significant and were relatable to how she interacted with students. Kelly remembered a very memorable assignment:

I can remember an assignment he [the professor] gave us as a midterm that had a lot of options. The option I chose was to watch a movie I had never watched before and it was really impactful to view education and why I was going into higher education and that type of thing. So, I felt like the assignments were really significant in my educational journey.

Kelly was able to have a positive relationship with the student development theory professor that allowed her to learn information that she continued to use in her career.

Legal Aspects of Higher Education was mentioned as an important class that showed relevance in all areas of student affairs. Megan made a very strong connection with the legal class and discussed it on a very personal level. Megan shared her feelings about the legal perspectives course:

The professor was so genuine and I really connected with him. I just always remember my legal class and I don’t know if it’s because my dad is a judge. And so that’s what really stuck out to me. I really enjoyed reading the cases and all that was fascinating. The other classes were great and I learned a lot, the theory and history, but I always come back to the legal class being my favorite.

Megan enjoyed the legal perspectives course because of her connection with the instructor who was able to teach her in a positive manner and sparked her interest in legal affairs.
Value of Internships

Participants considered internships as one of the highlights of the program. The internships fell under a course titled Reflective Practice in Higher Education and Student Affairs, and several participants described how the opportunity for internships was a capstone of the program for them. Being able to get exposure and practical experience in a department other than the graduate assistantship department was very impactful for the participants. It allowed them to gain varied skills in different areas within higher education, and if internships were not required, they would have maybe missed out on gaining these skills through their graduate assistantship.

Jennifer felt that the most positive experience with the master’s degree program was the ability to choose internships. This was a meaningful way for her to explore the different areas of student affairs. The quote below illustrates the impact of internships:

So I really enjoyed the experience because even though there’s a set curriculum, you are still able to essentially shape what internships you wanted to do. You can shape how many you wanted to do as long as you did the work of trying to get into that office. Ask the department how can I help you? This is what I want to learn and there was a lot of flexibility. This allowed me to kind of explore the different areas of higher education and student affairs.

Charlie was able to complete an internship with the conduct office that was one of the most positive experiences while being a graduate student in the program. Charlie stated, “My internship was to teach an ethics course and I was excited to do that for eight weeks. I loved that experience of getting to teach a class that actually counted as academic credit for students was a very cool integrated experience.”

Richard was able to complete two internships within Greek life and student conduct. He ended up working as a full-time professional in both Greek life and student conduct. He credited gaining significant experiences from the internships that allowed him to be qualified to serve in
both professional roles. Some of these experiences allowed Richard to gain counseling skills to guide students through tough conduct situations. Richard also gained confidence facilitating leadership workshops with Greek life organizations. Richard expressed that he had a difficult graduate assistantship experience, but the internships gave him positive opportunities:

I loved the internships. I was able to work with the Greek Life Office and gather those skills as a campus based professional other than when I was in headquarters. I never was involved in student conduct in undergrad, thankfully. And that experience working with those individuals and my supervisor who is not there anymore he, you know, they had a big impact and was one of the reasons why I looked for conduct jobs and I accepted this job. So those, I would put my internship in much higher regard than my actual assistantship.

Jennifer and Richard included on their resumes submitted as part of the document analysis that they completed internships within student conduct. Both resumes listed skills gained from the internship experience that lead to them currently holding full-time positions in student conduct affiliated positions.

Graduate Assistants Treated as Professionals

Being treated like a professional as a graduate assistant was something that was valued by some of the participants. Coming into her graduate assistantship role Hannah was really not sure what to expect in terms of how the graduate assistants would be treated within the student affairs department. She expressed her views about the departmental treatment:

I always appreciated it, how we were treated as professional staff, no matter the pay being lower or as still being graduate students. We were included in staff meetings, we were brought to the table for committee meetings, and we were about to basically do what everyone else could do so made us really feel a part of the department and it prepared me to be in the workforce.

Hannah also discussed the fact that her experience within her graduate assistantship department was considered professional work experience that resulted in first employment opportunity post-graduation. Hannah stated:
I even had my former employer tell me that if I had not had the experience that I had on my resume from the graduate assistantship program then I wouldn’t have been qualified for the position that I got. And so I went directly into an assistant director position.

At times, participants struggled to understand their role within the department and keep the balance between the graduate assistantship expectations and the undergraduate student leaders’ expectations who they advised. George spoke about always being challenged by keeping the balance between his graduate assistantship supervisor and the student leaders he advised, “A healthy challenge to figure out. What is going to make the students happy? And what is going to make the department happy? At times feeling like I am going at this all alone.”

Kelly discussed the fact that her supervisor trusted her as a professional to get a task completed without having him watch over her. She felt her supervisor was treating her like a professional:

I was doing the job basically, which I don’t think that all graduate assistants get quite the experience that I got. At the time, I probably thought it was really frustrating because he wouldn’t come to my program and I interpreted that as like not supporting me. I think now that I now am removed from and I understand better he really trusted me.

Michael described how he was grateful for how his department treated him as a professional:

I was really grateful that I was getting like hands on experience with student development. That I was in a department that really valued professional development and team work. That was another big thing. I felt I had some connections with the pro staff.

Overall, participants described that being treated as professionals within the assistantship department was extremely meaningful. These experiences gave them hands-on experiences that gave them confidence moving forward in their careers.
Importance of Graduate Assistantship Departments Allowing Autonomy

The term autonomy was mentioned several times with many of the participants. The idea that a supervisor would have the confidence in a graduate assistant, allowing them to be in charge of a project, was extremely meaningful during the graduate assistantship experience. Jennifer felt that advising a freshman program as a graduate assistant prepared her for her full-time professional role:

I felt that I had a lot of autonomy as a grad student and I think that feeling being trusted in that role and then coming back and providing updates and just filling that role. That definitely gave me the confidence and skills to be able to translate to do that as a full-time staff member.

Megan had a similar opportunity as Jennifer. Megan had a very positive working relationship with her supervisor who had confidence in her abilities and allowed her to have the autonomy to lead an emerging leaders program on her own. These were Megan’s thoughts about that project:

My supervisor said, like, Hey, I’m taking a step back. I want to be able to walk in if I need to and see how it’s going, but you were running the whole thing, and that moment of actually getting to plan it, organize it and what not. Also, I had to work with the students, the student leaders who are leaders of the program, and that piece of actually getting to work with them and form a bond and create a team with them.

The autonomy that Megan received from her supervisor and the opportunity to develop the program gave her confidence in her full-time professional role.

Jack thought that the autonomy during his assistantship was positive and appreciated that the department had confidence in him to take the lead on programs, but at the same time he felt that the pressure was intense. Jack shared these comments:

It was pretty intense just because they asked me to take the lead on several projects, mostly with academic enrichment programs. So, working with first gen students, underrepresented groups, and LGBTQ students. We had to work on
academic success. The programs were able to provide me with opportunities to lead workshops and things of that nature.

Even though the task of leading programs on his own at times seemed overwhelming as a graduate assistant, it allowed him to gain confidence and prepared him for his full-time role working within a multicultural center.

Most of the time having a change in the supervisor can cause difficulty, but in Michael’s situation it resulted in some incredible opportunities. The quote below is a good illustration of Michael’s experience:

My direct supervisor left to get a position at another university and we did not fill that position until July the next year. So, I basically had a really cool experience where the director said ‘figure it out’. I think that was a really cool opportunity for me to kind of spread my wings. It got me out of my comfort zone.

Michael’s situation could have been negative, but he felt supported and the opportunity allowed him to become adaptable and take initiative on the tasks that needed to be accomplished for the department. Michael included on his resume the list of responsibilities he gained through his graduate assistantship especially through the opportunity to take a more significant role within the department. His resume included training student leaders, managing a budget, advertisement of programs, and program logistics.

Angela was also able to experience autonomy throughout her graduate assistantship. Her supervisor showed confidence in her from the beginning. This is what Angela shared about her supervisor:

My supervisor really gave us the reins in our position. I didn’t feel like I had a boss that just said, you have to do this this way. We really could do things the way that we wanted to. Again, we could ask for help if we needed but I didn’t feel like I was in a box where this is how it is.

The concept of autonomy was a vital moment for many of the participants. Autonomy allowed graduate assistants the opportunity to plan and coordinate their own program, initiative,
or activity and provided them with great confidence in their abilities to move forward and be successful in the field.

**Meaningful Connections Between the Program and the Assistantship**

Another area of great discussion with the participants was the topic of connection between the graduate master’s program and the assistantship. Most of the participants thought that there was a direct connection; however, two felt that both areas lacked connection.

Angela felt the diversity class was very impactful for her since she did not come from a diverse background. This is how she described the impact of the class:

> During the diversity class we did a lot of journal entries and reflecting on things. I think specifically through the diversity class I kind of realized she [the instructor] wasn’t answering questions because she wanted us to come up with our own answers and that’s really what student affairs is about.

Angela was able to make a direct connection between the academics and the practical experience within her graduate assistantship. Angela used the same technique when advising students and allowed them to make their own decisions based on the same approach she learned from the professor in the diversity class.

Charlie also made direct connections between the diversity class and his graduate assistantship. As a graduate assistant, Charlie was working with students from majority Caucasian backgrounds who were also members of the same organization. Charlie struggled with how to advise these students in regards to diversity issues or topics. Charlie stated:

> I did see a lot of privilege and just trying to be delicate about what I say. A lot of old viewpoints or historic viewpoints that maybe passed down through the organization. You speak about a lot in class regarding student populations who may still feel this way or may represent certain characteristics of just old racism or just white privilege that you don’t want to believe are still so apparent in our culture or in society. Then trying to address those things and just seeing how people react to that.
There was a general positive feeling about the diversity course being added to the academic curriculum. Some participants felt that it should be a core requirement for the degree program.

Jack made a direct connection between the student development theory class and his assistantship. One specific assignment in the student development theory class that stood out the most to him was when Jack had to teach about one of the student development theories to the entire class:

During the student development class she [the professor] asked us to teach a student development theory. I don’t remember which one was assigned to me, but we had to teach it for the entirety of the class. And so that was the first time in my life that I had to actually make a lesson plan and come up with activities and manage my time. It was very challenging, but it was very beneficial to me as someone who works with workshops and going into classrooms and things like that.

Jack had the responsibility of facilitating many workshops and leading programs during his assistantship and felt that the skills he gained from his student development course assignment were directly beneficial to his assistantship. The opportunity to plan and teach the whole class allowed him to learn the skills that he could effectively utilize in his assistantship.

Richard also discovered a connection between the program and his assistantship through the student development theory course. Richard distinctly remembered how the self-authorship theory affected his interactions with the student leaders he was working with in his graduate assistantship:

Yeah, so there were several times when, you know, we're working with the Baxter Magolda and all that self-authorship stuff. And when we were working with our student leaders on, you know, holding their peers accountable, holding their fellow students accountable, we were able to kind of build that perspective and in order for them to take ownership in their own experience because they, you know, their peers put them in a position of authority and accountability and so making them take ownership so that was key.

Megan at first could not describe the connection between the coursework and her graduate assistantship but after some thought and reflection, she discussed how the student development
When I was given the task of like, look at this emerging leaders curriculum and revamp it. I went and I looked at some of the student development theories that we had been talking about. And so I took that as kind of a basis and then said, Okay, I’m not just making up and doing activities for no reason, like I did base the curriculum on student development theory.

Hannah really connected with the student development theory class and saw how the understanding of the theories assisted her in becoming a better graduate assistant. Hannah expressed how she found a connection between her undergraduate major and her graduate program:

I think some of the theory class that talks specifically about students in the stages that they’re in and how they’re developing into adults. A lot of that directly correlated with what was going on with a lot of our students. And a lot of it also correlated with things that I had studied in undergrad because I was going to be a teacher for middle school students. And in my mind, middle school students, and college students are very similar in a lot of ways because they are very big transitional stages. And even though the transition points are different, those are two, in my opinion, very big age groups that are going through a lot of turmoil and a lot of change and developing into what they are. And so directly from the theory classes, just being able to see the student that I was working with develop over time.

Angela reflected on the fact that the legal perspectives course really connected with her graduate assistantship especially when dealing with contracts to bring artists to campus:

My boss has said, like, you’re a professional and I trust you with the contracts. But it was just really emphasized, I guess with my legal class and we did have a very specific training with my assistantship. We weren’t the one signing the contract, but we did have to send it to a legal department. So I just understood how big of a deal it was and I’m glad that I had that experience.

George discussed how the legal perspectives course helped him deal with a frustrating moment he had with one of the campus organizations. The organization was involved in a troubling situation and George at first felt that the university was not being helpful. However, he
later reflected on what he learned within his legal course and understood why the university had to distant itself from the situation:

This organization that I know well got in some trouble for some things and my direct thought processes were like, why didn’t the school step in to help? And then I thought back to my legal class and revisited that there are a lot of policies and rules that intentionally removed the school away from certain situations.

There were two participants that felt that there was no significant connection between the academic program and their graduate assistantship. Kelly struggled to remember a specific example regarding a direct connection between the academic program and her graduate assistantship. Kelly mentioned, “I don’t know. I can’t say we talked about it. My assistantship there wasn’t much about applying what you’re learning in the classroom discussions at least. So that’s probably why I’m not recalling a specific example.”

Charlie connected with the diversity class mentioned earlier in this theme, but he otherwise felt no connection between the academic program and his assistantship. He had a negative experience with his assistantship and the academic program never asked him how his assistantship was going. Charlie felt that the academic program should have been more involved in his experience:

I didn’t have a positive assistantship. I don’t feel like there was anyone checking in on that from the actual program. Hey, are you getting anything from this? Is this a positive experience? Is this an assistantship that should continue and there was no check in on my assistantship because it is separated. But you have to be in this program to receive this assistantship. So there is a link there and they are connected. And I didn’t feel like there was anyone checking in on that or making sure that for me and my experience was positive. The biggest thing is checking on your graduate assistants and on your students about assistantships and see how that was going and if they’re getting anything from it.

Charlie’s situation was not similar to the other participants, but he felt that something could have been done to make his situation more positive if there was more connection between the program and his assistantship.
Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship

The graduate assistantship had a huge impact on the participants and allowed them to gain essential skills that were beneficial for their success as early-career professionals. The participants discussed not only what skills they acquired through their assistantships, but they also talked about the skills that they did not attain that would have been beneficial for them in their full-time roles. The value of gaining necessary skills through the assistantships was an important topic of discussion throughout the interviews.

Administrative skills were mentioned by a few participants as being a crucial skill gained through their assistantships. Some also stated that they were surprised by how much administrative skills were needed in their current roles. Angela mentioned that she remembered learning about contracts in detail, which was the skill that helped her in her full-time position. Angela mentioned:

Just yesterday I was on the phone with a DJ and I was asking him specific things about his contract and he’s well known in the city and like he’s done stuff. And he was just saying that no one has asked him something about his contracts and that maybe I should change my contract to be more clear, but that made me feel good.

Charlie felt surprised about how much administrative tasks a student affairs staff member had to do in their positions. He felt that he did not gain much administrative skills through his assistantship and when he started his full-time position he was surprised by the amount of administrative duties he became responsible for. Charlie stated:

More help with admin stuff. Just kind of what I don’t know if it’s like the skill itself or just like what to expect in a student affairs position. You know, you feel like you go into the field, Oh, I’m going to work with students all day, every day. You know, there’s this huge admin side of things that you’re going to have to experience.
Some assistantships allowed graduate assistants to work with budgets and some did not offer any opportunities to manage a budget. Megan really struggled in her full-time position figuring out how to create and manage a budget. Megan discussed the following:

We’re all functional adults and we all know the basic premise of a budget. And so I don’t know if it’s just everyone just assumes you’ll figure it out. I’m talking about how to use budget systems and how to report time, those kind of nitty gritty details. That once in your professional role, they’re kind of like, Oh just do them.

Megan also mentioned how budget management should be taught in the academic program:

You need to have an actual academic class that is literally about here’s an office’s year-long events and year-long expenses and figure out the budget. I don’t know how you do it, but I think that would hands down be the most beneficial class I would have taken.

Megan really struggled starting her first professional role with not understanding how to create a budget for her department or program. It was a skill that was missing from both the academic program and the assistantship.

Jack also mentioned the need for a program to add a budgeting class since he was not gaining that skill within the assistantship. Jack stated:

I wish we had a course in budgeting and program management. I think a lot of the programs were theory based, right, the history all those different classes. While they were great. I wish we had more like hands on kind of coursework.

Michael also felt that he did not develop budgeting skills during his assistantship, “I wish I had to learn about budget management even it would just have been like fake budgets and like learning how to do that.”

Hannah gained some budgeting experience through her assistantship. She was able to develop a programming budget along with her student leaders and programming council. She discussed how budgeting was a skill that greatly benefited her in her full-time role:
And to go from doing three committees to now an entire office and having to figure out all this zero budgeting and it helped me so now I’m building upon what I learned from my graduate assistantship on the basic level of one area, to now expanding that to an entire department.

Angela, Hannah, and Michael listed budget management on their resumes as skills gained through their graduate assistantship. Budget management was also included as a necessary skill on their current job descriptions.

Another valuable skill that was mentioned was the concept of building a team or managing people and developing positive relationships. Many graduate assistants were not given the opportunity to directly build a team or supervise others, but this was a common task they had to accomplish as full-time professionals. Megan described her experience working with student leaders that allowed her to gain valuable experiences as a supervisor and a leader of the team:

So now I supervise the person who took my original role. And so I’m using that same mentality of like teamwork and kind of team supervising. So that’s been probably the best part from the graduate assistantship for my actual like day to day life.

Michael also had a similar graduate assistantship experience that Megan had with her department. His quote illustrated the importance of building relationships:

I think the biggest thing I got from my graduate assistantship was the skills to develop like one on one relationships with students in ways that were both programmatically and professionally driven. So that helped me like get the programs and the learning outcomes checked off, but also to develop the relationships with the student as a person.

The administrative skills, budget management, and team development were the most valuable skills expressed by the participants.
Significance of Professional Development

The significance of professional development was apparent throughout the interviews. The graduate assistantships were valuable for day-to-day experiences, but professional development was where the participants built networks with other graduate students and professionals. These networks became very important to their success as new professionals. They served as a support network, a group to brainstorm creative ideas with, and a safe place to discuss struggles in the field. The idea of conference involvement was a key professional development opportunity that was a positive point for the participants. Conference involvement was more than just attending a conference, but becoming a member of a conference planning committee and spending time with others in the field.

Hannah was involved in conference planning first as an undergraduate student which made a significant difference in her decision to go into higher education. It was that network of professionals she met in those experiences that caused her to attend the state university. Hannah remembered a time when she met her graduate assistantship supervisor, “I was able to not only interact with my advisors, but talk to advisors from all across the region. I actually met my supervisor for my assistantship because she was on the board.” Hannah was able to continue her conference involvement throughout her graduate assistantship and as a new professional. She also discussed how networking beyond the conference was very important for her and she was able to develop another network of professionals over social media. She talked about how these social media chats really connected her with others:

I would participate in chats about going into higher education and still have those relationships now. So I think some of them, I’ll run into them at a conference and be like we’ve been Twitter friends for five years now. And now we’re meeting at this conference. One of the people I met through those chats, I am now working with some of his students as a mentor. And so just building those connections and keeping them going has been wild.
Hannah’s resume included extensive professional develop opportunities she was involved with during her graduate assistantship. The opportunities included association membership, workshop facilitation, and training attendance.

Megan was able to have very impactful experiences with her conference involvement and felt that her opportunity to be involved on a conference planning committee was crucial to her success as a new professional. Megan expressed how incredibly thankful she was that her supervisor allowed her to have the professional development moments at conferences:

And I was thankful for being able to do that [attend conference]. And, because that let me work with professionals from all across the country on a committee and I had never been on a committee, like I’d never just been on a committee. So being on that committee actually helped me a lot when I got here and got put on multiple committees and kind of that was the expectation.

Megan also discussed how conference involvement continued to help her in her role as a full-time professional:

And so that was me in an office of one. And so having that conference family to fall back on and going to the conference, and being able to connect and say, okay, am I crazy for this idea? Like, what do you all do? And getting that feedback has been amazing.

Kelly discussed the importance of her supervisor holding leadership positions in a national professional organization. Her supervisor became a positive role model and showed the importance of professional development and getting involved as a professional:

My supervisor probably played a pretty big role in me knowing that I could achieve those things and setting those goals within professional associations as well. And I’ve been able through my involvement in that I have some of the best relationships with my colleagues around the country.

Kelly also discussed the same theme as Megan in her interview about the importance of having a network of professionals that were in the same or similar positions. This professional network allowed both Megan and Kelly to have a discussion of ideas and provided support during the
challenges with the expectations of starting a new position. Kelly was able to gain confidence throughout all the insecurities of being in a new environment and the stress of being in charge.

Charlie was motivated by his conference involvement. Since he struggled in his graduate assistantship, the conferences held a special meaning to him. Charlie had previously discussed the fact that he worked with a certain demographic of students at the state university and the conferences were a great way to gain input on different experiences. Charlie talked about how the conferences solidified that he was in the right field despite his negative assistantship experience:

I think the array of conferences solidified that working in my department was something I would love to do and it was a reminder like, hey, not all students are from the same demographics or backgrounds and do want to listen to you and they do want to share your opinion, and be respectful to you and you can have impact. That was really great.

George was extremely involved outside of his assistantship with registered student organizations and also was involved with a professional association with conference planning. He was involved with some registered student organizations and also researched different ways to meet people across the state university. George discussed how one of the ways he met people across campus was becoming a member of search committees:

I was always willing to, like, hop in and be on a search committee and I did that because most of the time on the search committee were people that I didn’t necessarily work with. So being able to sit and engage and have conversations, but also tell me about what you do. How does that work? How did you come to know that you like to do that work? How can we become partners or how can I support you?

George was also involved in conference planning and felt that it was important to meet people outside the state university, “This is your opportunity to get out and get some outside of Arkansas experience.” George had the most diverse professional opportunities including membership in registered student organizations for black graduate students, participation in
search committees, and varied conference involvement. He was able to get multiple experiences from his professional development.

All the participants were able to take part in some professional development opportunities. It did vary from assistantship to assistantship in terms of how much conference involvement they were allowed to participate in or if the department offered opportunities throughout the year. Some departments provided common book readings or offered webinars. All the participants agreed that professional development was significant in their learning during the assistantship and provided a great foundation as they moved into their professional roles.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided a brief overview of the qualitative study summarizing the purpose, significance, and design of the study along with data collection and analysis. Following the overview of the study, I provided brief introductions of all 10 study participants, including a demographic table that described the gender, race/ethnicity, undergraduate major, and years of full-time employment.

This study revealed eight main themes including a generalist approach of the academic program, relationships with faculty, value of internships, graduate assistants being treated as professionals, importance of graduate assistantship departments allowing autonomy, meaningful connection between the program and the assistantship, value of skills from graduate assistantship, and significance of professional development. Each theme was described in detail and supported with many direct quotes from the participants.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Most higher education master’s programs have a requirement of graduate students to participate in a graduate assistantship along with their academic coursework. The assistantships are often through a division of student affairs where graduate students serve as members within a departmental team. The assistantship serves as a theory-to-practice opportunity where graduate students practice what they learn in academic courses through the assistantship experience (Creamer & Winston, 2002). The expectation is that these students will develop and become confident in skills that include facilitating meetings, advising students, submitting budgets, and becoming a part of a departmental team (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). The research confirms the importance of creating a connection between the academic program and the assistantship that leads to graduate students becoming more successful as a new professional (Perez, 2016a). By exploring the participants’ responses regarding how the graduate assistantship prepared them for their current role as a new professional, I was able to gain a perspective on the impact of the academic program and assistantship on their professional preparation. The themes that surfaced revealed the most valued and missed opportunities by the academic program and graduate assistantships for the participants. This chapter includes an overview of the study, discussion and conclusions, limitations, recommendations for future research, and recommendations for practice and policy.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experience of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examine the role the assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. The following questions were examined:
1. How did graduate students build connections between the graduate assistantship experience and the master’s degree program?

2. What role did graduate assistantship experiences play in the preparation for the first full-time position of early career student affairs professionals?

3. What knowledge and skills did early career student affairs professionals gain in their graduate assistantships during their master’s program?

This qualitative study used a case study approach to explore the research questions. Creswell (2008) stated that “a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system including an activity, event, process, or individuals based on extensive data collection” (p. 476). I conducted in-depth one on one interviews with ten participants who were employed full-time in a student affairs position, had been employed from one to five years post-graduation, and obtained a master’s degree in higher education from the state university. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked to self-identify their gender and race/ethnicity. They were also asked to confirm their undergraduate major and if they entered graduate school immediately following their undergraduate experience. All demographic information was reported in Table 1 in chapter four.

The thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data and explore the research questions. The thematic analysis allows the researcher to explore participants’ stories through interviews and develop commonalities (Braun & Clarke, 2010). All the participant interviews were recorded and transcribed for review. I listened to all ten recordings of the interviews and checked the accuracy of the transcripts. All the participants were sent their specific transcript for review with only five responding with minor revisions. I wrote interview summaries, developed codes, and created themes to report the commonalities across all ten interviews.
Eight themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (1) Generalist Approach of the Academic Program; (2) Relationships with Faculty; (3) Value of Internships; (4) Graduate Assistants being Treated as Professionals; (5) Departments Allowing Graduate Assistants Autonomy; (6) Meaningful Connection Between the Program and the Assistantship; (7) Value of Skills from Graduate Assistantship; (8) Significance of Professional Development. All eight of these themes were extensively described in chapter four.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

In the sections below, I discuss each research question, present my conclusions in light of existing research and the conceptual framework followed by the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for policy/practice.

The first research question that I examined was, “How did graduate students build connections between the graduate assistantship experience and the master’s degree program?” I asked the participants to share a time when they observed a direct connection between their master’s program (coursework) and their graduate assistantship experience. This particular question was often met with a pause, and the participant seemed to take extra time to reflect before they answered the question. The graduate assistantships or supervised experiences allow graduate students to apply their classroom learning to real-life situations (Komives, 1998; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). The hope is that the academic coursework (master’s program) and fieldwork (graduate assistantship) are in alignment resulting in a positive outcome (Perez, 2016a). This study showed that there was a connection between the program and the assistantship. Many participants connected specific academic courses to their work with students or on the tasks they completed for their assistantships. Internships were revealed as an extremely impactful opportunity that was required by the academic program.
The participants highlighted that the student development course was one of the most helpful courses in their work with undergraduate students while they served as graduate assistants. The student development course helped them better understand the undergraduate students and their needs as they were advising them in their student leadership positions. The participants could identify specific developmental theories that they utilized in real context while working with and advising the undergraduate students throughout the academic year. This finding was consistent with Lovell and Kosten’s (2000) research that revealed that student development theory awareness and connection with functional duties were significant to the connection with the graduate assistantship.

Another course the participants felt provided a connection between the academic program and assistantship was the legal perspectives course. Several of the participants could transfer the learning from the legal perspectives course to specific tasks within their assistantship through working with vendor contracts. They gained a real sense of the legality of documents and the importance of reviewing and receiving approval through the university’s general counsel office. Other participants dealt with judicial and conduct matters and found that having a foundation in legal perspectives was key in understanding why the university developed and used certain procedures and policies. This foundation of legal perspectives helped the participants assist undergraduate students when dealing with policy infractions and help them understand their due process.

Another aspect of the connection between the academic program and the graduate assistantship was the relationship with faculty. All the participants discussed how faculty were superb in connecting with the graduate students as experts in their areas of study. The participants commented that faculty members were well-respected in the higher education field.
This finding is consistent with other research that shows that there is great importance in how graduate students and faculty interact through mentorship and encouragement during the graduate academic experience (Lechuga, 2011). Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) stated that graduate students “consider their relations with faculty members to be one of the most important factors in determining the quality of their educational experience” (p. 556). This study showed that positive relationships with faculty had an extensive impact on the participants. Meaningful relationships with faculty are a key part of the graduate students' ability to successfully navigate their transition into an assistantship (Haley, Hephner, & Koutas, 2011). When graduate students develop meaningful relationships with faculty, they put more energy and time in their coursework. Positive relationships between graduate students and faculty also result in positive outcomes, such as career guidance and personal development (Beres & Dixon, 2016). Several participants in the study mentioned they enjoyed having current or former higher education practitioners serving as faculty. These practitioners related to the graduate students in different ways by giving advice on career areas or by providing examples of experiences they encountered in their professional roles. The findings from other research also indicated that the graduate classroom training should not only include faculty, but also current student affairs professionals and graduate assistant supervisors to ensure that students gain real-life career experiences (Liddell et al., 2014).

The participants discussed the opportunity to learn about different departments within student affairs as an extremely positive outcome of the internship. The opportunity to choose and learn about another area of interest was very exciting for the participants. Research has shown that out of classroom experiences for graduate students, such as internships are critical in developing professional networks and career goals (Liddell et al., 2014). This was true for the
participants in this study who were able to experience a new area of student affairs and possibly explore that area as a career choice. The participants appreciated that the internship was a required component of their academic program. Several participants decided to accept full-time positions within the field of their internship area. The varied skills gained through the internship and the requirement of the reflective practice course built a connection between the graduate master’s program and the assistantship experience that was very beneficial to the participants.

It is important to discuss the findings of my study in light of the Conceptual Model of Professional Socialization into Student Affairs within Graduate Preparation Programs (Perez, 2016a) that was described in chapter one. The model by Perez (2016a) states that since most student affairs preparation programs are comprised of academic coursework along with fieldwork (graduate assistantship/practicums), both these experiences need to be aligned for a positive outcome for the graduate student. The participants were able to discuss the impact of their coursework and internships as giving them the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in their graduate assistantships.

The Conceptual Model of Professional Socialization into Student Affairs within Graduate Preparation Programs explored the different cultural contexts of student affairs including national, professional, functional area, institutional, and individual (Perez, 2016a). The participants discussed the significance of professional development and the impact of their involvement in national organizations. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) suggested that academic programs could spend more time on ways to help graduate students continue to gain professional skills and knowledge after graduation. It is important to note that professional organizations and professional development opportunities are as much of the training grounds for new professionals in student affairs as the graduate preparation programs (Janosik et al., 2006; Tull,
The concept of professional development was mentioned by the participants in connection with the graduate assistantship, but not with the academic program. The involvement in professional development allowed the participants to meet other professionals in the same field around the country and develop support groups that helped them not only during their graduate assistantships but throughout their professional careers. All the graduate assistantship departments serving as functional areas were incredibly important since they all can develop their own graduate assistantship expectations and responsibilities. It was clear from the participants that each assistantship varied from each other and not every graduate assistant was gaining the same experience. Most participants had a positive experience and were able to gain valuable practical skills that assisted them to be successful in their full-time professional roles. If the graduate assistantship experience was negative, the internships filled the void and helped the participants gain valuable skills. The individual context was also incredibly important to the participants and even though the program was not functioning in a cohort model the support that each participant gained from other graduate assistants within student affairs was invaluable to their success in graduate school.

There was evidence that the participants were able to transfer their knowledge and skills gained in coursework to their assistantships and internships, especially when working with undergraduate students. The connection between the academic program and graduate assistantships was positive and aligned with the Conceptual Model of Professional Socialization within Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs (Perez, 2016a).

The second research question was, “What role did graduate assistantship experiences play in the preparation for the first full-time position of early career student affairs professionals?” The concept of fieldwork and hands-on experiences, including assistantships, internships, and
practicums have been commonplace within many student affairs graduate programs (Cooper et al., 2002; Janosik et al., 2014; Komives, 1998). The role of these experiences was significant in the success of the participants’ transition to their full-time professional positions.

The graduate assistantship played a key role in the preparation of the participants’ first full-time position. This finding is consistent with Young (2019) who reported that alumni from higher education administration programs agreed that the graduate assistantships had a considerable contribution to their confidence and success in their professional careers (Young, 2019). Even though the assistantships varied in responsibilities and expectations, the assistantship experiences allowed the participants to gain a glimpse of what they would encounter in a student affairs career. Flora (2007) stated that graduate assistantship assignments varied because of the discipline of the department, accreditation rules of the program, and institutional culture. Participants in this study also recognized the diversity of assistantships across students affairs, and while most had a positive experience, they felt there could have been more consistency across the departments. The participants stated that some departments treated graduate assistants as staff members where they were included in departmental meetings, committee memberships, and were asked their opinion about important departmental decisions, while other participants were not included in departmental opportunities and did not gain similar meaningful experiences. Overall, the participants had positive experiences in their assistantships where they were given meaningful tasks and gained valuable skills that helped them transition to their current professional positions.

All the participants felt challenged by their assistantships and at times were even overwhelmed and lacked confidence in their abilities. Some participants mentioned being thrown into their assistantships without much guidance, training, or expectations. The quote
from Haley et al. (2011) echoes these sentiments from the study participants: “Although they are at the beginning of their graduate educational process, they are expected to act as professionals in their GA positions starting their first day” (p. 8). The lack of guidance, training, and expectations led to a decrease in confidence and in some ways delayed their learning from the assistantship experiences. Some participants mentioned that it took a semester or even a year for them to feel comfortable in the assistantship because they were somewhat on their own trying to figure out their role. Perez (2016a) mentioned that much of the burden to successfully transition from graduate school to a new professional is placed on the individual. However, some of the participants also expressed that being thrown into their graduate assistantship later helped with their transition to their full-time positions. Some of the on-boarding processes at their current institutions were similar to their assistantship experiences and not extensive enough to give them immediate confidence in their new positions. Since they had already gone through similar experiences with the assistantship, they felt more comfortable with uncertainties and more confident that they would eventually understand the position and be able to move forward.

Along with this topic of confidence, autonomy was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Haley et al. (2011) found that graduate students participating in assistantships that required individual action (autonomy) were more successful. Some of my study participants discussed that their assistantships became much more meaningful and impactful when they were given a project to complete on their own or when they were charged with leading a group of others to accomplish a program, initiative, or goal. The participants could vividly remember the moment their supervisors gave them an individual assignment. That was the moment when they gained confidence almost immediately because their supervisor had confidence in their abilities to take on a departmental initiative. This individual assignment or project was a place where the
graduate assistants could be creative, developmental, and critical. They were able to be creative while designing a program, develop student leaders through advising, and improve the program through assessment. These autonomous moments were extremely impactful to the participants and allowed them to take ownership of their learning and gain confidence in their abilities.

The third research question studied was, “What knowledge and skills did early career student affairs professionals gain in their graduate assistantships during their master’s program?” There were varied skills gained from the graduate assistantship experiences from the participants. The main skills that were mentioned by the participants were administrative skills, budget management, and team development. There was also a mention of limited exposure to crisis management. Participants also noted that the skills not gained from the state university assistantships included navigating campus politics, direct supervision, assessment, and oral/written communication. Based on the prior research, the skills that are beneficial for new professionals in student affairs include budgeting (fiscal management), institutional/campus politics, assessment (including research and evaluation), legal knowledge, supervision, oral and written communication, administrative/management, advising, and crisis/management/intervention (Cooper et al., 2016; Burkard et al., 2005).

This study revealed three main skills that were gained during the graduate assistantships; facilitating administrative tasks, managing budgets, and developing teams. Several participants felt that they received administrative skills through working with contracts and different vendors for programming. Other participants worked with contracts through housing contracts and billing invoices. The internship allowed some graduate students to work with administrative processes following a very specific procedure and making sure all communication was sent by a certain deadline to students dealing with conduct matters. Some participants learned basic
administrative skills through their assistantship but were still surprised about the high number of administrative tasks that were expected in their full-time positions.

Budget management was another important skill gained through the assistantship. The participants mainly gained budgeting experience through managing programmatic budgets. They were placed in charge of an event and given an amount of money they could spend to develop a specific program. This was extremely helpful for the graduate assistants as they learned how to create and balance a budget. None of the participants were aware of their overall departmental budgets managed by their supervisors. They were not educated on the many different types of funding sources, for example, state allocated funds, developmental/fundraising monies, or student fees. Some participants felt that they understood the basics of budgeting, but not the overall importance or how they would need these skills as a new professional. Ardoin et al. (2019) reported that some SSAOs felt that budget management should not only be the responsibility of the graduate assistantship but also should be taught by the academic program. A couple of the participants also mentioned that it would be extremely helpful if the academic program had a course that concentrated specifically on managing budgets and best practices on utilizing university resources.

Team development was another instrumental skill the participants of this study gained through their graduate assistantship experiences. This skill was largely developed by advising student leaders when planning programs and coordinating departmental initiatives. The graduate assistants were charged with the responsibilities to build a team, train leaders, and set expectations, and all of these skills were transferable to their full-time roles. Prior research also revealed the need for developing human relations skills in new professionals that include teamwork, basic counseling, and group facilitation skills (Burkard et al., 2005). Similarly,
Herdlein’s (2004) study also noted the importance of the human relations skills that include communication skills, interpersonal skills, empathy, and ability to work with diverse populations. Consistent with this prior research, graduate assistants in this study discussed the value of developing teamwork skills while working with undergraduate students to their success as full-time professionals.

Some of the participants were able to learn crisis management skills through their assistantships, but with a more limited occurrence. Two participants had direct crisis management experience when regularly dealing with student behavior. These particular participants found crisis management skills extremely beneficial for their first full-time roles and potentially even helpful in the future as they moved into higher-level administration.

**Limitations**

This qualitative case study explored the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examined the role these assistantships played in the preparation for their current position. This study only included participants who graduated from a higher education administration program at the same public 4-year research institution and who were all employed as graduate assistants in four different student affairs departments. Based on the scope of the study, the results have limited transferability to other types of institutions, other graduate programs, and assistantships outside of student affairs.

While identifying possible participants who met the requirements to take part in the study, it was surprising to learn that many former graduates from the higher education graduate program at the state university were no longer working in higher education. Also, some graduate students who met the graduation requirement of the study participated in graduate assistantships
outside of student affairs and could no longer be part of the study. These unforeseen issues limited my ability to recruit more participants in my study.

As the primary investigator, it is important to mention that I serve as a departmental director within the student affairs division at the state university which may have affected my perspective and judgement. It may have also affected how participants responded to my questions about their assistantship experiences. However, even though I serve as a departmental director I have not directly supervised any graduate assistants in the last five years. I also ensured that I did not directly supervise any of the study participants.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The first recommendation for future research is to complete a similar study with a more diverse group of participants from different types of institutions. It would be beneficial to examine to what extent the impact and experiences of graduate assistants vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and institutional type. A more diverse sample could shed some light on varied experiences of graduate students in their graduate assistantships, academic program, or at the university as a whole.

Another recommendation for future research is the need to specifically examine the connections between the academic program and the graduate assistantships. This study showed a meaningful connection, but it was mainly with student development courses, legal perspective courses, and the value of internships. These are significant connections, but there was an implied need to make a stronger connection with more communication between the two experiences. A future research study exploring this concept could be beneficial for higher education graduate programs, student affairs departments, and graduate students. It would be important to examine what connections need to be developed to better support graduate students within student affairs
graduate assistantships. It would also be helpful to examine graduate assistants’ experiences in student affairs who come from graduate programs outside of higher education and explore what role the graduate assistantships play in their socialization into the field of student affairs, especially in the absence of the academic program connection.

A research project regarding why graduate students who have completed a master’s degree in higher education administration do not pursue full-time positions in higher education could be beneficial. Many higher education graduate students have decided to enter different fields outside of higher education. Research shows an attrition rate of between 50 and 60% for new professionals in student affairs (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Several graduates who I contacted for possible participation in this study were no longer working in higher education. These graduates did not qualify for this study; however, understanding why they decided to leave higher education and at what point in their careers could be a worthwhile future topic.

Finally, future research should also examine the skills needed to prepare for a first full-time position in student affairs. More research on these skills could benefit the higher education graduate programs and the hiring departments of graduate assistants. A better understanding and identification of skills that are necessary for a successful transition to a full-time role would be helpful for the division of student affairs. Professionals who are better prepared for entry into full-time roles would improve all aspects of student affairs, including programming, student advising, and resource management.

**Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

There are several recommendations for practice and policy from this qualitative research study. The first recommendation is to offer training to all new graduate assistants that is consistent across all the assistantships. Understandably, each department has different programs
and expectations for graduate assistants, but there needs to be an added consistency in regards to divisional expectations, position descriptions, and time commitment. This could add more of a cohort model concept within student affairs for the graduate assistants that some wish they had in the academic program.

The second recommendation would be to build a better link between the academic program and graduate assistantships. I think it would be positive for faculty advisors to check in not only on the graduate students’ academic progress but also on their graduate assistantship experience. There was one participant who felt he was not supported through his graduate assistantship experience and felt that the academic program could have been more supportive. The desire for a better connection between the program and the assistantship was also implicitly expressed by other participants in the study.

The third recommendation is to effectively market the graduate assistantships to make sure that the assistantship hiring departments find the best fit for their assistantship positions. There needs to be a more consistent assessment of the graduate assistant interview/hiring process and the procedure of placing graduate students into assistantships. Also, it is important to make sure that the graduate assistantship position descriptions include keystone projects that allow for autonomy. The concept of allowing autonomy seemed to be a critical piece for the success of graduate assistants. The autonomous projects the graduate assistants engaged in from start to finish were not only significant accomplishments on their resumes but also were impactful and meaningful experiences. These opportunities gave them confidence in themselves and had a positive outcome on their transition to a full-time position.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I gave an overview of my qualitative case study by reintroducing the purpose, research questions, data analysis techniques, and eight themes that emerged through extensive exploration of the participant interviews and document analysis. Additionally, I reviewed the findings by each research question and discussed the themes in light of prior research and the conceptual model. I concluded the chapter with recommendations for future research and practice to highlight the importance of building a strong collaboration between the academic program and the graduate assistantships, developing a consistent and cohesive training for graduate assistants across student affairs departments, and allowing more autonomy and ownership in the assistantship experiences.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A

Permission of Copyright

From: Perez, Rosemary J [SOE] <rjperez@iastate.edu>
Thu 7/18/2019 3:45 PM
To: Mary L. Skinner (marys@uark.edu)

Dear Mary,

Thank you for your message. Your study certainly sounds like an interesting one given the role of assistantships in many student affairs preparation programs, and I’m pleased to hear the conceptual framework I created is a helpful one for situating your work.

Truthfully, I was not aware that JSPTE had returned copyright licenses back to authors. I read the statement as well, and given the parameters, I am now the person who can grant individuals permission to use the figure rather than the journal. With that said, you have my permission to use the figure in my manuscript in my dissertation and ask that you cite it, and note you have permission to use copyrighted material.

If you have any additional questions, please don’t hesitate to reach out. Wishing you the best as work on your dissertation.

Best,
Rosie

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Rosemary J. Perez, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, School of Education
Faculty Affiliate, Women and Gender Studies
Director, Education for Social Justice Certificate

From: Mary L. Skinner (marys@uark.edu)
Wed 7/10/2019 4:19 PM
To: Dr. Rosemary Perez (rjperez@iastate.edu)

Dr. Perez,

Hello, my name is Mary Skinner and I am a doctoral student at the University of Arkansas - Fayetteville. I also serve as the Director for the Office of Student Activities at the university. I am preparing my dissertation proposal on a narrative qualitative study exploring the impact of student affairs graduate assistantships on new professional preparation.
My purpose statement is... The purpose of this narrative qualitative study is to explore the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examine the role these assistantships play in the preparation for their current position.

I was wanting to use the conceptual model of professional socialization within student affairs graduate preparation programs diagram you developed, but need to get copyright permission.

I was able to review the copyright standards with the Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education. And it stated this "NEW: All articles of this journal, whether published in the past or future, are now licensed to you under a Creative Commons By-NC license and copyright to articles is returned and retained by their respective authors."

I wanted to contact you to see what the procedure would be to include the diagram in my dissertation. If contacting you is the proper procedure or if I need to go through the journal.

Any help would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you,

Mary Skinner
Appendix B
Informed Consent Form

The Impact of Graduate Assistantships on the Preparation of Early-Career Student Affairs Professionals

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Principal Researcher: Mary L. Skinner
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE
You are invited to participate in a research study about student affairs graduate assistants, their experiences as graduate students and transition to first full-time position in student affairs. You are being asked to participate in this study because you obtained a higher education master’s degree and are currently in your first full-time role in student affairs.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?
Mary L. Skinner – email: marys@uark.edu

Who is the Faculty Advisor?
Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili – email: kmamisei@uark.edu

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examine the role these assistantships play in the preparation for their current position.

Who will participate in this study?
The anticipated number of participants will range from 10 – 12. The participants will all be former graduate students who have obtained a Master’s degree in higher education within the past 2 – 5 years, were employed as a graduate assistant within student affairs and are currently employed by a university within a department under a division of student affairs.

What am I being asked to do?
Your participation will require you to discuss your experience as a graduate assistant in student affairs and how that experience prepared you for their current full-time role.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
There are no risks or discomforts anticipated for any participant.
What are the possible benefits of this study?
It is anticipated that this study will expand the body of knowledge of the impact of the graduate assistantship experience on the transition to full-time employment within student affairs.

How long will the study last?
The study will take approximately two months, but the participants’ involvement will consist of about a 60-minute interview and review of the transcripts and themes for accuracy.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?
No, there is no monetary compensation for participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?
No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?
If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. A decision to withdraw will not result in any negative consequence or penalty to you.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All information will be recorded anonymously and the researcher will have sole physical control and access to the data. All the data will be stored securely. The researcher will select pseudonyms to identify each participant in written and oral reports with no references linking your identity to the study.

Will I know the results of the study?
At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili at (479)575-3781 or kmamisei@uark.edu or Principal Researcher, Mary L. Skinner at (479)601-1667 or marys@uark.edu. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Mary L. Skinner - marys@uark.edu

Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili - kmamisei@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.
Appendix C

Personal Interview Protocol

Participant #: 
Date: 
Facilitator: 

Description of the Study:

I will inform the participants about the purpose of the study, the schedule of interviews. I will explain how the study findings will be used and disseminated. The participants are also informed that they will be asked to take part in member checking by reading the transcripts and checking the accuracy of the findings.

Questions:

Tell me about your experiences as a graduate student in the higher education master’s program? 
  • What was your favorite part?

What influenced you to seek an assistantship in student affairs?

How would you describe your experience as a graduate assistant? 
  • What was your favorite part?

What was a favorite project that you worked on during your graduate assistantship?

Share a time when you observed a direct connection between your master’s program (coursework) and your graduate assistantship experience.

In what ways did your graduate assistantship experience influence you in pursuing a career in student affairs?

Describe a specific experience that encouraged you to pursue a professional role in student affairs.

What role did your graduate assistantship experience play into your transition to your current professional position?

What skills gained through your graduate assistantship experience were the most beneficial for your current professional position?

What skills do you wish you gained during your graduate assistantship experience that would have helped you in your current role?
What were the most beneficial responsibilities/duties of your graduate assistantship experience that helped the most with your current professional position?

What professional development opportunities did you participate in while being a graduate student (graduate preparation program and assistantship)?

- Did you attend any regional or national conferences/conventions?
- What opportunities did your institution offer (committees, task forces, team projects, trainings)?

Describe the first 90 days in your current position? How prepared did you feel?

What advice do you have for graduate master’s student affairs programs about the preparation of student affairs professionals?

What would be your advice to student affairs departments that are hiring graduate students in their graduate assistantships?

What advice would you have for graduate students who are preparing to pursue a career in student affairs?
Appendix D

Initial Participant Correspondence

From: Mary Skinner
Sent: January 11, 2020
To: Participant Name
Subject: Dissertation Qualitative Study – Graduate Assistantship Experience

Dear [Insert first name],

My name is Mary Skinner, and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of Arkansas. In addition to my studies, I am also employed as a full-time staff member at the University of Arkansas serving as the Director for the Office of Student Activities.

My dissertation will be a qualitative case study concentrating on the impact of the graduate assistantship experience on the transition to the first full-time professional position in student affairs. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the graduate assistantship experiences of early career master’s prepared student affairs professionals and examine the role these assistantships play in the preparation for their current position.

Participation in this study includes one 60-minute interview that will be done on-line through Zoom or face-to-face. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is agreeable with your calendar. The interview will consist of about 16 questions. As a participant, you will be able to review your transcript and clarify any information. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

You qualify for this study because you have earned a Master's of Higher Education from the University of Arkansas, served as a graduate assistant within a student affairs department at the University of Arkansas, and are currently employed in a full-time position in student affairs for a minimum of 1 full calendar year and no more than 5 years. I was able to confirm your graduation date with the Graduate School and employment as a graduate assistant through the division of student affairs.

Thank you in advance for your time and willingness to take part in this study. I look forward to meeting you and learning about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Mary Skinner
Appendix E

IRB Approval Letter

To: Mary L. Skinner
    ARKU A665
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
    IRB Committee
Date: 12/13/2019
Action: Exemption Granted
Action Date: 12/13/2019
Protocol #: 1911233814
Study Title: The Impact of Graduate Assistantships on the Preparation of Early Career Student Affairs Professionals

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Ketevan Mamiseishvili, Investigator