

Spring 2011

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Citation Details

Haley, K., Hephner LaBanc, B., & Koutas, P. (2011). New school, new job, new life: Transitions of graduate assistants in student affairs. *Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 18(2), 5 - 19.

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New School, New Job, New Life: Supporting the Transition of Student Affairs Graduate Assistants

Karen J. Haley, Brandi Hephner LaBanc, and Peggy Koutas

Student affairs professionals have a responsibility for the professional development of graduate assistants (GAs) in the department as these positions are marketed as first professional positions. While prior literature has addressed the transition of graduate students into graduate school, there is little about the transition process for students with graduate assistantships in student affairs. Student transitions are important as they may set the tone for their first professional experience and ongoing professional development. Four key themes emerged from the voices of the graduate student participants in this study as they described their transition process into a GA position. First, they viewed the GA experience as a professional opportunity. Second, their sense of belonging was dependent on their perceived contribution to the department or division. Third, relationships mattered as they navigated the transition into their GA role. And finally, self agency (individual action) was apparent as they became engaged in their own success.

Student affairs professionals are trained and charged with the responsibility to help develop students outside the classroom as a means of preparing them for their future careers. Given this common understanding in the practice, it would seem appropriate that this same professional creed would apply as student affairs practitioners work with graduate students, specifically their graduate assistants. Although numerous studies have examined the socialization aspects of transitioning to graduate education (Austin, 2002; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Baird, 1992), socialization to graduate school is only one aspect of the transition process for students with graduate assistantships in student affairs. This gap in literature limits the knowledge available to student affairs leaders and faculty to address the multi-dimensional transition process of graduate students. To provide a foundation for bridging this gap, this exploratory study was guided by the question: What is the perception of the initial transition experience of graduate students who concurrently assume an assistantship role in student affairs?

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The context of graduate students with student affairs assistantships is provided alongside current research, a theoretical framework pertaining to the transition experience, and a description of the study's methodology. Several themes emerging from this study are discussed and related to implications and recommendations for practice.

Background & Literature

Graduate education programs influence American culture as they address social and economic concerns, and "graduate degree holders will allow us to address the complex, compelling issues of our time" (Stewart, 2010, p. 36). As of Fall 2009, more than 1.8 million students were enrolled in graduate school in the United States; 56% of students were enrolled full-time, and more than 59% were women (Bell, 2010). Since 1998, graduate schools, in general, have seen an annual rise in enrollment of 2.3% with underrepresented populations, including women and temporary residents, outpacing their counterparts by more than two to one (Bell, 2009). These demographics indicate significant changes regarding who is enrolling in graduate education, as well as the roles and responsibilities of those individuals. Today's graduate student tends to be over 30 years of age with responsibilities as a primary caretaker and with outside employment during graduate school. The demands of multiple responsibilities influence the availability and flexibility needed to take advantage of the opportunities to connect with individuals and departments that can be essential to success at the graduate level (Brus, 2006).

Further complicating the issue, many graduate students take on the responsibility of graduate assistantships, broadly defined as financial assistance and professional experience provided by an institution, in exchange for services (Flora, 2007). Of the more than 43,000 doctoral students in 2008, 48.5% received some form of assistantship as a source of funding (NSF, 2009). Financing graduate education is one of the most significant concerns for both student and institutions (Bell, 2009; Kim & Otts, 2010; Stewart, 2010), and assistantships are an "integral component of [the] graduate educational enterprise" (Flora, 2007, p. 321). This need for financial support means that while transitioning into the role of a graduate student, which includes enculturation into a profession, many students take on the role of graduate assistant and face multiple, simultaneous transitions. The demands during this time vary by discipline, institution, and the specific focus of the graduate assistantship position, but all positions afford an opportunity to gain one's "...first real taste of academic culture and politics from the inside" (Perlmutter, 2008, para. 6). Graduate assistantships are generally categorized as Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA), Graduate Research Assistantships (GRA), or Graduate Assistants (GA). Each one of these roles can be considered a type of apprenticeship and ideally includes a "...deliberate development of knowledge, skills and values" (Golde, 2008, p. 22).

The most common type of assistantship is a GTA (Flora, 2007). The primary task of the GTA is teaching undergraduate courses under the direction a faculty supervisor. Additional duties may mirror those of a full-time faculty member, such

as attending meetings, assisting students, and assessing coursework (Flora, 2007). Research-focused assistants (GRA) generally participate in an apprenticeship-like role to support the grants, publications, and experiments of faculty members (Flora, 2007).

Of particular interest in this study are students who accept positions as GAs. They are generally assigned to an administrative office or department, as opposed to individual faculty members, and perform a variety of tasks. Assistantships within student affairs divisions differ from the academic assistantships of GRAs and GTAs in in scope and intended outcomes; student affairs units are oriented towards the support and development of the student population, while academic departments are oriented towards generating knowledge (Hirt, 2007). GA tasks may include advising undergraduate students, developing programs, and addressing diversity issues in addition to administrative tasks (Flora, 2007). GA placements may occur within multicultural centers, student government offices, or most predominantly, in residence halls (Belch & Mueller, 2003).

Although graduate students frequently assume assistantship roles within student affairs units, and recent research has examined the skill development of student affairs GAs (Hephner LaBanc, 2010), the personal experiences of these students have yet to be fully studied. The "focus on variability, interconnectedness, and environmental influence" (Evans, 2003, p. 185) of transition theory provides an ideal framework for exploring concurrent transitions of this particular student population. Transition theory provides a lens to explore the multi-faceted relationship between the person and the environment and the individual's perception of those relationships. Schlossberg (1981) highlights the relevance of transitions to the study of adults:

Adults continuously experience transitions, although these transitions do not occur in any sequential order, nor does everyone experience transitions in like manner. All we know is that all adults experience change and that often these changes require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself. (p. 3)

Enrollment in graduate school while simultaneously serving as a graduate assistant is inherently complex and subsequently necessitates a comprehensive framework for examining the positive and negative outcomes of this experience. Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transition is useful in framing an exploration as it is situated in the context of the individual, and therefore supports understanding of a highly personalized experience. By focusing on an individual's perception of experience (internal) and the context of that experience (external), transition theory affords the flexibility to examine holistically the multiple, simultaneous transitions of the graduate students in this study.

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) categorize the factors influencing the transition process as the "4 S's": situation, self, support, and strategies. These factors facilitate understanding an individual's ability to manage the transitions. *Situation* is defined as any aspect of an individual's context that affects the perception of and the ability to cope with an expected or unexpected transition. This may include the catalyst, timing, duration, prior experience, emotional state

at the time of transition, and locus of control. For example, the training received by a graduate student may provide a context to manage their transition. The category of *self* is primarily the personalized demographic and psychological characteristics that define one's perception of who he or she is as an individual, which may influence the GA's perception of the transition. Factors related to *support* are delineated by their level of stability and consistency, their alterations over time, and the contexts in which they are dependent. GAs may have support factors within their family, peer, or supervisor networks. The final *S* of transition theory, *strategies*, is defined as the coping resources employed to manage the physical and emotional impact of the transition (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBritio, 1998; Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Purpose of Study

Graduate assistants in student affairs often play an important role in the operational effectiveness of the university due to their extensive contact with undergraduate students in advising, programming, and administration. Many students who fill GA positions in student affairs are in master's programs designed to educate and develop future student affairs professionals. 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.

Acknowledging that there is a significant transition from undergraduate to graduate status is important in understanding the new GA. However, new students entering a graduate degree program face more than just academic transitions; there may also be geographic and emotional transitions. In addition, transitions are not limited to the first week of staff training or classes. Transitions often are ongoing over the course of the entire master's degree process.

The intent of this exploratory research was to identify the self-identified transitions of student affairs GAs. Factors influencing the transition process (Schlossberg et al., 1995) will aid in describing how the GAs approached, managed, and moved beyond the transitions over the course of their first semester in graduate school.

Method

Explorations of individual experiences are primarily conducted through qualitative research methods (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research conducted via the Internet has become increasingly accepted as a valid method for gathering and analyzing data (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam & Associates, 2002). The use of survey methods, through an open-ended question format, mitigates some limitations of other potential methods (i.e., focus groups, interviews) in that participants are provided the flexibility of time and location. Additionally, surveys minimize the potential to alter behavior and responses due to context and positionality of both researchers and participants (Markham & Baym,

2009; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Trochim, 2000). Based on the theoretical frame of transition theory, only the participants can define a transition. Therefore, the use of online surveys allowed participants the time and anonymity to reflect, reconstruct, and define their experiences.

The population for this study was graduate assistants in student affairs, primarily those who were also seeking a master's degree in higher education / student affairs / college student personnel. The sample for this study was all graduate assistants (n=62) in student affairs at one large, Midwestern, public university with both a master's and doctoral program in higher education. An e-mail invitation to participate in the study was sent by the study researchers through the Associate Vice President of Student Affairs. Two follow-up e-mails were sent to increase the participation rate.

Each student who agreed to participate clicked on a link to a survey with open-ended questions developed from the transition literature about his or her first semester experiences as a graduate assistant. Twenty students responded and completed the entire survey for a response rate of 32%. Included in the survey was a short demographic section (i.e., degree program, department, year in program, undergraduate institutional type) to identify representation, yet respondents were not required to indicate their employing department as the sample size was small and therefore could jeopardize anonymity. Nonetheless, based on the feedback provided by participants who chose to include their department, 8 out of 15 departments with GAs were represented. Sixty percent (n=12) of the respondents had completed at least two semesters (the equivalent of one academic year) in their assistantship role. Seventy percent (n=14) of the respondents were enrolled in the master's level, college student personnel preparatory program.

Data analysis had two components. First, the research team read through the survey answers and took notes about the transitions identified by the participants. The researchers then exchanged their ideas to generate open coding categories to reflect how the participants went through their identified transitions (Charmaz, 2005; Saldana, 2009). Second, the data were coded using Schlossberg's 4 S's as a way to view the data through the lens of theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). The resulting codes were compared and sorted, reducing the data to large overarching themes (Merriam, 2009).

Limitations

The limitations of the study include voluntary self-selection of the participants and data collection at only one institution. Additionally, the use of online surveys inherently eliminates the use of non-verbal cues, which may inhibit the interpretation of the data (Markham & Baym, 2009). While the results cannot be generalized, we anticipate that the identified transitions and how the participants responded to the transitions will be the basis for further study about the graduate assistant experience in student affairs.

Transitions

Several transitions were identified by the participants; some were unique to their situation, such as family issues, while others were common among many participants, such as moving to a new town or state, getting situated before training or school began, meeting new people, and starting graduate coursework. Transitions that appeared to be noteworthy and most relevant to the GA experience focused on change of status, work expectations, and support networks.

Students identified a change of status as a primary transition. Many talked about their new positions as professionals, indicating they were expected to immediately start work as any other staff member; however, several noted that they were treated more as student staff rather than professionals in their specific department. Several had no undergraduate experience in the field of student affairs and were adjusting to a new career environment. In addition to their individual status, many GAs were transitioning to a new institution, a new institutional type (large research university), or different student population (diverse). Finally, many were not familiar with the institution and the type of students served.

While the GA work load expectations were 20 hours per week, many of the GA positions required more hours. This was primarily noted by the residence hall directors; however, several other GAs expressed surprise by the amount time and energy required to be successful in the position. While hall directors had lengthy training that helped them respond to the new challenges, other GAs felt they had very little training and were expected to be familiar with the division and understand how to manage university systems from their first day. In addition, the GAs had varying levels of responsibility, which may not have been supported through training.

Another transition described by the study participants focused on the loss of current support networks and the creation of new networks. Students who experienced intensive training were more likely to feel they had supportive networks in place by the time the school year actually started. Those without extensive training were left to build their own networks. While a majority of the respondents mentioned colleagues or peers as being pivotal in aiding their transition during their early GA experiences, it was often a network of people that assisted (including others' supervisors, peers, faculty, and upper administrators).

Key Themes

Four key themes emerged from the voices of the participants as they described their transitions. First, they viewed the GA experience as a professional opportunity. Second, their sense of belonging was dependent on their perceived contribution to the department or division. Third, relationships mattered as they navigated the transition into their GA role. And, finally, self agency (individual action) was apparent as they became engaged in their own success. While we present each theme separately, we will make the linkages between the themes, provide evidence through the participants' words (presented in quotation marks), and connect their

words to Schlossberg's 4S's (situation, self, support, and strategies).

Professional Role

The majority of the students were specifically looking for professional training or development, as well as experiences that would serve them in their pursuit of a student affairs career. By applying for a GA position, they were seeking job experience, applied skills, hands-on experience, and as one student said, "exposure to diverse opportunities."

They anticipated entering the GA role as a professional and becoming "an active participant in the department." They stated their job expectations as working directly with students, programming, and supervising. Many also expected to have a certain level of autonomy and responsibility, in other words, a professional student affairs position. A few of the respondents found that they indeed were regarded as professionals; however, others noted that they were treated as a student worker or as "only" a GA. One GA feared, "I would end up with experiences that a student worker should be receiving."

The situation depended on the department where the GA was located, the ability of the supervisor to provide a professional experience (support), and perseverance of the GA to demand specific experiences (self). One student identified an unsupportive environment with little possibility of improvement and took the initiative to change to a different GA site during the second year that provided more structure and more thorough training.

The participants' advice to future GAs was to "gain respect from the other GAs early in the process," ask questions up front (strategies), and remember that "professionalism is the key" to finding a full-time job. The students understood that the GA experience would help them secure their next position and thus were looking to be treated as professionals.

Sense of Belonging

One avenue for students to connect to their professional role was to feel they belonged in their GA role, in their department, and in the division. We asked the participants at what point they felt they truly belonged in their GA position. This query generated more data than expected. Rather than simply saying "after training" or "at the end of the semester," many students gave detailed information about their sense of belonging. Several students felt they never belonged, and one stated that an immediate connection was felt; however, most felt they were a part of the department by the end of the first semester.

The situation influenced when they felt connected. For example, several students cited their lengthy training as the way they become connected to their position and colleagues, and "felt like a part of the 'team' by the start of the academic year in August." Others told of the unstable situations in their department and how that contributed to their sense of not belonging. One

student noted that a change in job title and unexpected staff changes left a feeling of being unsettled. However, two students noted a negative experience within their department that actually created a positive outcome when the GAs bonded over the experience and supported each other.

Self as a factor in belonging was both a negative and a positive. Several students noted their own “adjust[ment] and doubt during those first couple of months,” while others cited their inability to work with specific individuals hindered their sense of connection. On the other hand, some students, through their own efforts, ensured their success through perseverance and hard work. While they may not have intentionally established strategies to create a sense of belonging, one strategy was particularly useful. The students who were given an opportunity to take ownership of a task—or created one of their own—felt they belonged in their unit. One student acknowledged that the sense of belonging was achieved when, “I finally started my own project. Prior to that, I was finishing up projects that people before had started, so it was hard to find ownership in those assignments.” Another GA created a Facebook page for students, while others successfully hired and trained new staff. One student said, “I was given tasks by my supervisor that allowed me to display my strengths.” GAs who took on their own projects, gave speeches, and handled their first major duty calls in the residence halls found success, which led to their sense of accomplishment and belonging. One GA who did not have the opportunity to take ownership of a project and never felt connected to the GA role articulated the disappointment by saying, “I’m sad to say that I’m leaving here in a few days, and I am leaving without a sense of accomplishment. This year, I have completed only one project of merit. I found my entire experience to be one of confusion and frustration.”

Support from supervisors, directors, and other division staff was also cited by several students as contributing to their sense of belonging. One student noted that “Higher administration would say hello to me even though I did not know them very well. They took the effort to recognize who I was because I am a part of that team.”

Relationships

It was not processes that facilitated the GAs initial transition experiences; it was the people. A variety of relationships seem to have an impact on the graduate student’s transition to the assistantship role. The relationships most frequently mentioned were those with students, supervisors and colleagues, and their peers (other GAs).

As it related to their situation, the students anticipated having a high level of involvement with students in their new environment. Respondents indicated that they specifically saw themselves as being involved with and serving students. This belief is likely to be directly related to their personal experiences (self) as an undergraduate student or observing others performing student affairs responsibilities. While several comments, such as “I did not understand the

student population here” and “My initial obstacle was finding a way to fit in with my area staff,” expressed participants’ anxieties about building successful relationship with students, it seems that establishing these relationships actually correlated to their self-identified successes.

The GAs’ relationships with supervisors were a different story. Looking back on the first two weeks of their GA position, most students vividly remembered their interactions or lack of interactions with these individuals. Supervisors were mentioned as the biggest hindrance to the students’ transition, or just the opposite—supervisors were critical in aiding in the process (support). This theme seemed to indicate that graduate students relied heavily on the supervisor to assist them with their integration to the work environment.

There was a secondary theme associated with the supervisor-GA relationship and its related emotional impact. Phrases describing these relationships and experiences ranged from “she’s an amazing teacher” to “she didn’t know what she was doing or how to utilize me.” The respondents overwhelmingly sought support from supervisors and colleagues, and the emotional outcome was directly tied to whether or not that need was met.

The respondents frequently indicated that lack of clarity about job responsibilities and communication patterns were the most challenging things to overcome. One student indicated, “During the initial experience, I feel that there was not much direction at all from my direct supervisor... Because there was no direction, I often found myself with no projects to do.” When clear communication and direction were lacking, it seemed to become more challenging for students to feel as though they were successfully contributing to their work environment (strategies). To that end, respondents indicated that constructive feedback was helpful during transition so they had an accurate gauge on their contributions, which was important to their sense of belonging.

Interactions with colleagues and peers were more often than not seen as positive and helpful (support). When asked what facilitated their initial transition, one student stated, “I really learned everything from the second year grads and on-the-job experience.” Another student responded, “The residential life team—everyone that was involved in my training helped facilitate my experience.” Comments from respondents also indicated that being intentionally connected to a network of others in the work place was an effective strategy for transition. One student was extremely specific about this approach and wrote, “I found that the person I was paired with was a good fit...I believe drawing away from the supervisor and [working with a different] staff member was a good process.”

Self Agency

As noted through the Schlossberg (1981) designation of self and evident throughout the discourse of the previous three themes, the individual’s initiative is equally as important as relationships in the transition process. Despite the interconnectedness, we found the role of the self to be worthy of a separate theme,

self agency, which can be defined as the ability to promote one's self in order to move forward.

While some respondents indicated that they struggled with gaining confidence in their own skills and felt apprehensive about how they could contribute, others communicated their commitment to seeking out opportunities and support systems for their own success. One respondent showed a high level of self knowledge when describing the search for a GA position, "Everywhere I looked [in the division], the core values were prominent. I found the GA [experience] to be challenging compared to other universities and thought it would really test my limits." Another recognized the role of self-directed learning, both in and out of the classroom. This sense of self agency was also evident in their GA role as shown through the expectations set by one GA for their staff, "I set our expectations very high and held the workers to it. In doing so, we maintained a high level of standard throughout the semester. Administration consistently complimented our operations."

One student acknowledged the role of self agency, "The only thing holding me back was my own apprehension," but the student didn't immediately know what strategies would be useful to take control of the future. However, the advice the student later offered to potential GAs showed self understanding, "While your GA site (and supervisor) have your best interest in mind, and the academic program is the place to help you grow, you must still be very aware of your actions and their alignment with your career goals. Don't blindly follow." Other advice was equally inspiring, "Get out there and take advantage of every opportunity that arises, no matter how big or small it may be."

Even when students discussed their barriers, they also identified strategies for success: communicating, learning expectations, and navigating the campus culture. The barriers were a part of the transition into the role of GA, but they were also a means to work through the transition. The shift came in the recognition that they had both the ability and means to be successful in their GA roles—their locus of control became internal when they realized they were not entirely controlled by the situation and had the necessary strategies to create change.

While some students entered their new GA positions with self agency that helped them successfully transition through the first semester, others found their professional purpose through supportive relationships and a sense of belonging. When students had good relationships (both peer and supervisor), work that was meaningful, and an avenue to develop their voice, then they believed that the GA position had provided them with a valuable professional experience.

Discussion

While Schlossberg's transition theory helped to organize and understand the data, the themes that arose from the participants' words connected to different literatures. Each theme is supported by additional work that helps to ground the implications and recommendations.

Evidence of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) 4S's in all three

themes created a meaningful way to think about each theme. What were the supports and strategies that were available to the students to work their way through their initial transitions? How did the situation—their specific GA assignment—contribute to their transitions? And how did their individual talents help them through the process? The data from this study confirmed that the 4S's informed the transition process for student affairs GAs.

The beneficial networks created by many students were important to their development as new professionals. When collegial connections were not available, then their own sense of belonging diminished. On the other hand, when strong connections were made with peers, negative relationships with supervisors were mitigated. This evidence from the study parallels the research on socialization to graduate school (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2010; Sweitzer, 2009). Peer relationships connected students to the field, especially if the peer was a more advanced student.

While students view their GA position as a professional role, not all supervisors viewed them as professionals. However, even when students are in a *formative* stage of professional identity, they internalize the values of the field (Carpenter & Miller, 1981). This formative stage should be about learning and practicing the skills needed (Carpenter & Miller, 1981; Hephner LaBanc, 2010), and therefore should be a professional experience, even if it does not hold the same level of responsibility. In fact, by the end of a two-year GA position, many students are in the *application* stage of professional identity. Carpenter and Miller (1981) described this stage as a time for students to test ideas seek out best practices, and gain confidence in their abilities. In addition, the stage requires a self responsibility, which we see evidence of in our final theme, self agency.

While self agency may determine individual success, one study in particular speaks to the GAs' academic journey. When given the opportunity to control and develop their own academic degree (self agency), graduate students ended up with greater professional credibility, enhanced belief in their power to perform, and a strengthened commitment to their own continuing development (Stephenson, Malloch, & Cairns, 2006). Our findings not only support the work by Stephenson et al., but also suggest that students' self agency was important in their GA positions, as well as their overall success as graduate students and new professionals in student affairs.

Implications & Recommendations

The graduate assistantship by its very nature lends itself to providing exposure to real-life, theory-to-practice experiences. And while students indicated that they specifically sought out assistantships in order to enhance their professional development, it is still the responsibility of the GA supervisor to facilitate learning. Many respondents indicated a concern over clarity of their role. In order for the assistantship to be meaningful, the responsibilities should be clearly outlined and have specific and measurable learning outcomes. Additionally, student affairs professionals and faculty from the related academic program need to intentionally collaborate in order to design integrated experiences that will

further enhance the graduate experience. By designing learning-oriented assistantships and tightening the classroom-workplace connection, students will come to more fully comprehend theory-to-practice experiences, resulting in the development of a credible, professional identity.

When asked how they became graduate assistants in the field of student affairs, students did not mention mentors or encouragement from others. This miss, coupled with the fair number of students who stated that they had happened upon their assistantship role, indicates a failure to develop a paraprofessional pipeline. Student affairs professionals need to become more comfortable with the active recruitment of undergraduates to the profession. By recruiting and training qualified, motivated undergraduates through graduate programs and assistantships, the profession will reap a more focused and sustained professional body.

More attention is owed to the training and development of those supervising GAs. In many departments the newest professional staff members are supervising GAs; this organizational arrangement does not often lend itself to providing optimal, learning-rich experiences for students. To that end, supervisor training could be developed and transition strategies should be identified. Some of those strategies might include elements of orientation to the workplace, productive communication tactics, and recognition of differences (e.g., cultural, generational) to enhance GAs' sense of belonging. Supervisors must also be coached on developing clear job descriptions and providing constructive feedback. Both of these elements were identified as having a direct and positive impact on the transition process, as well as contributing to students' sense of professionalism and belonging in the workplace.

A comprehensive orientation to the GA's department is an important transitional strategy, but it is only one component of that process. Students should be intentionally connected to professionals outside their immediate work environment, including colleagues in other departments and at multiple levels within the organization. A division-wide orientation for all GAs would help students connect to the larger organization. Exposure to other colleagues and opportunities to build relationships with them has the potential to enhance a student's sense of belonging. One way to encourage these relationships is through a formal mentoring program that reinforces belonging, self agency, and professional identity.

It was evident that students came to feel a sense of belonging after they had completed a significant task or offered some level of contribution. As mentioned earlier, one student stated, "I finally started my own project. Prior to that, I was finishing up projects that people before had started, so it was hard to find ownership in those assignments." It is important that supervisors understand how critical completing an assignment may be to the transition process. When delegating authority early in the transition period, supervisors should be cognizant of the student's approximate competence and capitalize on relevant expertise. Attention should be paid to the scope and complexity of the task so as not to overwhelm the student or create a situation in which they are bound to fail. Instead, supervisors should assign projects or substantial tasks early in the student's

transition and scaffold the assignments to best gauge the GA's skills and abilities. If projects are not available to the student early in their transition, another approach is to provide multiple opportunities for the GA to share their opinions and perspectives on the work of the department.

Although self agency was a remarkable theme in this study, it is important to remember that not all GAs will be agents for themselves. This is a simple but critical notion. Student affairs professionals need to consider how to guide a student toward self agency. We believe the tactics offered above can promote self agency in these students. Specifically, when students are intentionally recruited to a clearly defined graduate assistantship, they are more likely to have a greater level of confidence and clarity about their specific role in the organization. Furthermore, if they are assigned well-trained and prepared supervisors and have exposure to the tutelage of other colleagues, GAs are likely to interpret the environment as more supportive. And finally, when GAs are given a task and have the tools to complete it, they are likely to feel as though they have contributed to their environment, fulfilled their prescribed role, and hopefully satisfied their supervisors and others. The culmination of these fairly simple tactics can boost students' confidence and self agency. Our research shows that self agency was evident in those students who considered themselves to be successful and felt a sense of belonging. For those students who lack a sense of self agency, it is the responsibility of the student affairs professionals around them to help them find their path.

While this exploratory study further defined GA transitions and identified four important themes, further research would provide student affairs professionals with additional knowledge to help ensure a successful transition for GAs into their new roles. One important way to advance the research is to collect data from different institutions across the United States. More comprehensive data will not only help support our findings but will offer additional insight into the actions student affairs professionals need to take in order to ease the GA transition period and, therefore, improve the GA experience. Our ultimate goal should be to assist GAs in gaining the experience they need to become productive and innovative members of student affairs.

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