

Watching from the Margins: Graduate Students in the Student Affairs Paradigm

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How many graduate students are enrolled at your institution? What are the demographics of your graduate student population? What types of programs or activities are offered for your graduate students? Do student affairs units include graduate students in their programming? Are programs currently offered that may be helpful to graduate students? How does your office inform graduate students of available campus programs and activities?

Your response to these questions could be an indication of how graduate students are viewed on your campus. Furthermore, it may underscore the emphasis placed on undergraduate students in institutions (Poock, 2004). However, it is common to find institutions overlooking the importance of providing programming or activities for the graduate student population. Moreover, there is a lack of research and theories concerning graduate students. For example, research on graduate students has focused on orientation, socialization, and admissions (Poock, 2004). Hence, the purpose of this study was to assess student affairs programming for graduate students at institutions with a significant percentage of graduate students.

In order for student affairs practitioners to perform their duties adequately and successfully, it is imperative that they are trained and knowledgeable in how to accommodate the graduate population as well as the undergraduate population at their institution. However, there are few theories focusing on the graduate student experience. This leads to the question of what is being used to educate future student services professionals on how to serve graduate students? Often graduate preparation programs primarily deal with training in how to best serve the undergraduate student population. In essence, graduate students are left out of the equation in the student preparation curriculum because there is little theory to draw on coupled with the emphasis on undergraduate education. While the traditional focus of student affairs professionals has been undergraduate students, we can utilize our knowledge of student development research and theory to assist in shaping policies and practices that effect the education of graduate students as well.

Literature Review

Similar to undergraduates, graduate students will expect us to address elements of their experience and we must remember that graduate students are not simply extensions of their undergraduate counterparts. Graduate education is more specialized and puts its students at the forefront of the current state of knowledge (Kuh & Thomas, 1983). However, as noted

previously, there are few theories to assist us with understanding the developmental process of graduate students.

Theories

In examining the literature for student development theories applicable to graduate students, an abundance of theories focusing on undergraduates were found but there was a scarcity of theories focusing solely on graduate students. However, there are several developmental theories that could apply to both undergraduate and graduate students (i.e., Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development, 1995; Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development, 1970; Schlossberg's Transition Theory, 1989 as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) as these theories examine individuals' personal and interpersonal lives, which may in turn closely relate to the way individuals think, feel, behave and relate to others.

Although student development theories for the undergraduate population may help practitioners to better understand both undergraduate and graduate students, the fact still remains that these theories were designed using undergraduate students and their experiences. Therefore, generalizing these theories to all graduate students could be just as detrimental as categorizing all students of the same racial or ethnic group (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Graduate students are clearly different than undergraduate students and their needs and institutional experiences are profoundly different. Hence, there is a need for research and theories which focus specifically on graduate students. Perhaps, adult development theories may provide further insight into this population of students.

Utilizing adult development theories, practitioners can develop a greater understanding of this important sub-population of their institution's enrollment. Similar to student development theories, adult development theories often focus on undergraduate students as well, specifically adult students who returned to college to pursue a degree at the undergraduate level. However, there are some adult development theories that can be cross-applied to the graduate student experience as well (i.e., Erikson, 1980; Levinson, 1979) as these theories are more concerned with social, cultural and personal factors.

Utilizing development theories focused on undergraduates and adults could enhance the programming efforts for graduate students. However, we must also consider there is a lack of sufficient theory based on graduate students as we strive to meet the needs of a diverse graduate student population.

Needs of Graduate Students

According to the literature, the needs of graduate students will vary based on a number of factors, i.e., background, education, and work and life experiences. For example, Baker (1992) found that older graduate students perceive a need for and anticipate using services differently than do younger graduate students who seem to be more dependent on campus-provided services. Younger graduate students may focus on career development, health services, financial aid and housing services. In contrast, older graduate students tend to be more concerned about child care, learning resource center services and counseling services. The type of academic advising and advisers needed may also differ with age. Moreover, the graduate experience and success can vary greatly across and within demographic groups. Therefore, it is necessary when

discussing services for graduate students to take into account demographic factors that contribute to differential graduate student experiences and successes and adjust the services accordingly.

In Hahs' (1998) study of the perceived needs of graduate assistants, findings revealed that approximately 30% of the respondents desired to attend workshops on thesis and dissertation writing, computer training, writing a vita or resume, grant writing and financial aid. In addition, approximately 35% were interested in informational resources regarding financial aid, research and travel, support funding, library resources, employment resources and student insurance. Finally, about 50% of the students surveyed were interested in research expositions, conferences and forums that provided opportunities for their research to be presented. Findings of Hahs' study indicate that, for the general population of graduate students, there is a great need for information and resources.

Isaac, Pruitt-Logan and Upcraft (1995) discovered that current graduate students are likely to have parental responsibilities, have different health concerns and require services more in common with their counterparts who are full-time workers. Some other examples of life events or circumstances that affect graduate students include, career changes because of technological advancements that eliminated jobs; families who have experienced a divorce or death of a spouse, which necessitates a previously non-employed person to enter the work world; and/or single women who view higher educational attainment as the means to secure well-paying jobs for current needs and ultimately a comfortable independent retirement. Integration of these life events allows students to proceed through the changes necessary to persist to the point of degree attainment. Schlossberg (1989) identified support as a critical area necessary for positive student development. When dealing with a transitional situation (i.e., divorce, loss of a job/income or returning to school after a significant lapse of time) adult students identified support as important to their success as students. Likewise, support is critical to the success of students beyond the baccalaureate.

Graduate students have to balance multiple roles as they are often employed full-time, are spouses, parents and care givers as well as students (Isaac, Pruitt-Logan & Upcraft, 1995). Frequently, achievement of educational and career goals, especially for women, has often been delayed while family circumstances were given priority. Accordingly, their developmental tasks differ from those of undergraduates (Erikson, 1980). As undergraduates, knowledge acquisition was often accomplished by memorization of facts while different skills, including the ability to think critically, create new knowledge and "think outside the box," are required of graduate students (Erikson, 1980). As aspiring professionals, graduate students must be afforded programming and related activities that develop these skills. By doing so, institutions fulfill their educational missions more completely by providing appropriate human as well as academic development (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).

Research Design

Qualitative studies provide an opportunity to examine areas in which relatively little is known about a phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Since little was known about how student affairs practitioners serve the graduate student population, a qualitative research design was considered appropriate for this exploratory study. A qualitative research design allowed the researchers the flexibility to adapt the design and focus of the study given new information instead of testing specific hypotheses. The primary research questions for this pilot study were:

What types of programming and/or activities are offered for graduate students? What is needed to facilitate programming for graduate students? What are perceived barriers for offering programming and activities to graduate students?

Site and Sample Selection

Four institutions in a Southern state, varying in size, type, funding source and graduate student population, were selected to assess how graduate students were served by student affairs. Sites in the study represented a population of cases (Stake, 1994) using a typology based on (a) institutional type, such as, research, doctoral, comprehensive (master's), or liberal arts (b) primary funding source, private or public; (c) size, such as, small (less than 8,000), medium (8,000-20,000), large (greater than 20,000); (d) graduate students comprising 20% of total student population (excluding professional students, i.e., M.D., J.D., M.B.A.).

Institutions in the sampling frame included a (1) Research University, a public, urban institution with a research focus and large student enrollment (30,000+); (2) Liberal Arts College, a private, liberal arts institution located in an urban area with a small student enrollment (less than 8,000); (3) Research University, an urban, private research institution with a medium student enrollment (10,000+); and (4) Doctoral University, an urban, public doctoral institution with a medium student enrollment (16,000+). By selecting these institutions, the researchers explored student affairs programming for graduate students in a variety of contexts to discern if there were any patterns across institutions relative to the services available for graduate students.

Purposive sampling which is essential for naturalistic research was utilized in this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). Individuals with the primary responsibility of administering student activities and/or programming at each campus were identified and contacted via telephone to ascertain their willingness to participate and schedule an in-person interview at a mutually convenient location.

Procedures

Methods used for data collection included face-to-face interviews, audiotapes of interviews, fieldnotes and artifacts. These data sources are evidence of a naturalistic study and provide the basis for a sound methodological design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Interviews were audiotaped and lasted a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of two hours. Participants and institutions were assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

A guide using specific open-ended questions that were asked in a conversational style (Yin, 1994) allowed the researchers to maintain consistency and to obtain common information from each of the interviewees. By utilizing a standard open-ended interview format, the variation in questions respondents were asked was minimized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To measure the constructs of the study, questions during the interview focused on respondents' perceptions of institutional support and culture, programming decisions, graduate student involvement and methods for informing students of activities. Questions were not asked in any specific order and the interviewers experimented with various approaches regarding the best order to ask questions as sometimes the response led to other specific questions being asked. Probes were used to expand on responses and to allow for information that yielded context specific data, insights and anecdotes illustrating how student affairs serves graduate students.

Artifacts and supporting documentation included university catalogs, newsletters, websites, newspapers, brochures and demographic information of the student population. Documentation of this type provided additional information for understanding the services offered to graduate students and the institutional culture.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred throughout the project and insights gained during earlier interviews were used to inform later interviews. Information obtained via interviews was subject to triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of data sources occurred when documents (newsletters, brochures, and newspapers) were examined to confirm emerging findings. The process of member checks involved the interviewees in the study voluntarily reviewing a draft of the study's tentative interpretations to assure results were plausible (Merriam, 1998).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim to discern if a central thread was expressed by study participants across institutions (Merriam, 1998). Following the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1994), a coding system was developed to identify patterns or themes that were prominent across informants and institutions with topics divided into subtopics at different levels of analysis. Coding categories representing the topics were written in the margins of the transcripts to help sort the data. Coding occurred throughout the analysis and ultimately focused on the core categories developed from the constant comparative method as well as the common threads that emerged from the data.

Limitations

Small sample size, time constraints and cost were limitations of the study. Given that there are only four institutions in the study, care must be taken in the interpretation of the results and their generalizability. Nonetheless, results of this study can be used to guide imminent research.

Findings

Findings of the pilot study illustrate the need for student affairs professionals to develop knowledge about their institution's populations, needs, interests and resources. Moreover, the results also illustrate the need for collaborative, interdepartmental efforts at the institutional level. In the analysis of the data, we found there were two broad categories of themes with several underlying, but connected themes across all four institutions. The two categories of themes were a focus on the undergraduate population and inclusion of graduate students in campus programming.

Focus on Undergraduate Population

All of the institutions in the pilot study had a graduate student population of at least 20%, excluding students enrolled in professional schools. It was interesting that three of the four individuals interviewed did not know the demographics of their respective graduate student population and indicated that they primarily dealt with undergraduate students.

Many of the individuals interviewed referred to their professional schools when asked about the graduate student population and did not perceive the nonprofessional graduate student population to be significant. For example, at one institution where graduate students constituted 27% of the total population, the participant responded, "I don't really have the numbers, we have about 800 total, couple hundred part-time evening students and the rest are full-time day students. We have another couple of hundred students who are traditional graduate students...." At this particular institution the graduate population excluding professional students was 1,323.

Three of the four interviewees emphasized that programming is planned for the entire campus and that student organizations should take the initiative and plan programs according to their needs. At the private, research institution, students were doing just that as the institutional culture was student-driven with students responsible for planning their own programming. At this institution, graduate students were guaranteed a minimum of 50% of the fees paid by graduate students.

Programming at each of the institutions is open to graduate students but three of the individuals perceived that the department(s) or graduate school were assessing needs and providing programming for graduate students. However, there was no evidence to support this assumption. Accordingly, when individuals were asked if there was anyone specifically responsible for providing programming or information in general about campus activities or programs to the graduate student population, the response was generally "no one to my knowledge unless the graduate school or evening school is doing it." Again, none of the participants had followed through to confirm their assumption relative to actual programs being offered for graduate students.

Inclusion of Graduate Students in Campus Programming

In examining the role of student affairs in the involvement of graduate students while pursuing graduate degrees, numerous inferences were made by student affairs administrators as to why these students are often not included in programming efforts. The perceived benefits and barriers for offering programming for graduate students provides more insight on why graduate students are often overlooked in the student affairs paradigm.

Perceived Benefits

Even though the institutions in the study did not actively involve graduate students in the campus community or provide programming, they still noted there were benefits to the campus community. They indicated that if their offices promoted a more inclusive environment for graduate students to become involved through programming that benefits would be multiple and mutual. These are excerpts for some of the perceived benefits for including graduate students in campus programming:

I think, first of all, having them feel a part of the university and later on after they graduate it's not going to be just that they felt a tie to their department but to the entire school. It's good for them in a way that they feel like they have that tie but it's also good for alumni relations. I think they would speak highly of the university, speak positively about it and like later on that may come back to the institution in the form of positive word of mouth referrals and alumni contributions.

The purpose of student affairs is to educate the whole person for society and that doesn't just mean undergraduate students. We can utilize graduate students as role models for undergraduates and have them assist us in breaking down the cross-generational gaps.

You know, we got to assess what's important to graduate students in order to make the claim that we can provide a better quality of life . . . So I think it's all about assessing what graduate students really want, need, desire to have a better education which makes them happier alums which makes them happier donors and makes the whole experience better.

Perceived Barriers

Three of the four interviewees mentioned a lack of financial resources as a barrier for offering programming to graduate students. Moreover, the individuals at the two public institutions indicated that being currently overworked as well as a lack of staff would serve as barriers for including graduate students in campus programming.

One of the participants noted that reaching graduate students would be a potential pitfall that could contribute to low attendance at events resulting in the elimination of graduate programming until it was perceived that a greater number of students would attend. Since three of the campuses identified fewer than 10 registered graduate student organizations, there was concern about how to reach the total population of graduate students. Participants also noted limited knowledge of graduate student needs, concern with program attendance and collaboration as barriers to graduate student programming.

Little knowledge of the needs of graduate students. Two participants expressed that they had little knowledge of the needs of graduate students when asked what would be necessary to provide programming for graduate students. One respondent noted, "Finding out specific needs of graduate students and step by step implementing small programs and each year taking programming a step further." While another respondent remarked, "I would probably need to have more contact with the graduate school to see, you know, what kind of things, what are their needs, to do some more research on that, I'm not even sure how many graduate programs we have. So, research and a budget."

Perception that graduate students would not attend activities. All of the participants indicated that because of work or personal obligations that graduate students might not attend programs or activities. Two interviewees noted "that a lot of our graduate students have full-time careers and then they come to night school or something," indicating the lack of free time available to graduate students, while another respondent remarked, "Even though students may want to participate they may not have enough time and it wouldn't be because they didn't want to participate just a lack of time."

Collaboration Vital. Only one institution did not have a separate graduate school in the organizational structure for the institution. The individuals at the three institutions with a graduate school noted that a linkage or collaborative effort with the graduate school and colleges and/or departments in conjunction with the student affairs division would be crucial for including graduate students in programming efforts. As noted previously, the participants knew very little about the needs of graduate students and acknowledged the need for additional research so that appropriate programming could be provided for graduate students.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study revealed several implications for practice relative to programming for graduate students. For example, institutions with a significant graduate student population could provide services to meet the needs of graduate students. Even though there are general programs that can be offered for all graduate students, administrators may have to conduct additional research on the specific needs of graduate students at their institution to account for their diversity. In addition, student affairs practitioners across all functional areas should consider graduate students when planning programming for the academic year. Simply informing graduate students of the programs or available activities on the campus would be a step in the right direction. At most institutions, graduate students pay fees, some of which should be used to provide programming for graduate students. Furthermore, involving graduate students in the campus community has many of the same benefits as the integration of undergraduate students. For example, students who feel a part of the campus community are more likely to stay at the institution and maintain their connection to the institution as active alumni. Other benefits may include increased retention of graduate students, graduate students serving as mentors or role models for undergraduate students, better opportunities for academic and social advancement of all students and stronger preparation of graduate students in critical areas of development. Hence, we cannot assume that graduate students are too busy and would not get involved but we should understand that graduate students will find time to do what is important to them and they need our support as well.

Professional associations in student affairs must emphasize the necessity of providing services to all students and not focus only on undergraduate students. Perhaps, if professional associations actively promote services for graduate students or even advocate providing services for ALL students, then will we see a concerted effort by institutions to include all students in campus programming. However, until graduate students become a focal point of professional associations, student affairs preparation programs can initiate changes in the curriculum to ensure graduate students are addressed.

Although the separation of student affairs and academic affairs is useful administratively, much can be achieved by the two units working in tandem. Student affairs can explicitly address graduate student learning and development theories and collaborate with the graduate school in enhancing the learning environment. Faculty must also work with student affairs administrators to bridge the gap between student affairs and academic affairs. This could result in a richer, more responsive experience for graduate students.

Student affairs practitioners and educational theorists have yet to compile adequate research or developmental theories concerning graduate students. Findings of this study indicate that an assessment of graduate student needs would assist institutions in providing programming

appropriate for graduate students. In addition, research could be conducted across institutional types to discern how student needs may differ by discipline, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Further research must be conducted on graduate student experiences so that theory can be developed to assist student affairs administrators in addressing the diverse needs of this population. As student affairs practitioners and scholars, we need to begin to make sense of the graduate experience in order to ensure that future curricula and graduate programs in higher education are meaningful and enhance the experience of graduate students. The creation of theory focusing on graduate students will facilitate the inclusion of graduate students in the curriculum of graduate preparation programs. Thus, it is anticipated that once “new professionals” enter the profession and begin to fulfill their administrative responsibilities that they will include graduate students in their programming efforts.

Conclusion

There are many factors that have contributed to graduate students being neglected in campus programming efforts. These reasons include: the lack of student development theory specifically addressing graduate students, exclusion of graduate students in the curriculum of graduate preparation programs, diverse population of graduate students, focus on undergraduate students, workload of student affairs administrators as well as an insufficient budget and a lack of emphasis by student affairs professional associations.

As the college population changed in the latter half of the 20th century, student development theory evolved for various undergraduate student populations. Now, although some research exists on graduate students and their needs, additional study is necessary in order to evaluate student and adult development theories and to ascertain their value to 21st century student affairs practitioners. The role of student affairs programming is critical to this endeavor as it is often espoused that practice should guide theory. Experimentation, after thoughtful institutional evaluation of needs, will continue to be an invaluable source of data for practitioners as programming is developed for graduate students. The findings of this study suggest that when we fail to serve the needs of graduate students they are often compelled to watch campus life from the margins.

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