

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE
PROCESS OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP FOR
STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE
STUDENTS**

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Research on preparation programs for student affairs professionals has focused primarily on identifying competencies. Limited attention has been paid to the process of how meaning is made of preparation program experiences. Of the scholarship conducted, minimal consideration has been paid to the relationship between development and the environment.

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of self-authorship for graduate students within a student affairs preparation program, and the environmental conditions that promoted that process. Utilizing narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Shank, 2002), data was collected through in-depth interviews of six graduates of a student affairs preparation program meeting the standards set by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2009), and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lieblich et al., 1998). The preparation program studied was

located at a public research university in the Midwest. The results were considered in relation to constructive-developmental theory (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010), self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1982, 1994), the environment of reference model (Conyne & Clack, 1981), the learning partnerships model (Baxter Magolda, 2004), and transition theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

Results indicated that although movement toward self-authorship was achieved those who graduated had not fully reached self-authorship. The conditions identified that promoted the process of self-authorship included self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives. For example, participation in self-reflection helped participants separate their own meaning from that of others, as well as determine the value of the meaning made. The results also indicated that the participants sought out support within the environment as they experienced transition. Finally, the findings included a description of conditions within the environment that aided the participants in deciding to select the specific preparation program studied.

Although the interaction between the environmental conditions and the participants' meaning making systems varied, the findings can be transferred to student affairs preparation program environments, as well as practitioner environments.

A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESS OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP FOR
STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE STUDENTS.

By

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Dedication

To my friend, Cristina Manieri, who was with me throughout this journey even if only in spirit since 2007.

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My deepest gratitude to my parents and siblings, both the Schoper and Salazar sides, as well as the Biffel family, who has served as my Maryland family. You have listened to many “rants”, prayed countless prayers, witnessed my tears and joys, and pushed me to continue on when I wanted to give it all up. For your support I will be forever thankful.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Graduate education in the United States began in 1861 when the first Ph.D. was granted by Yale University (Council of Graduate Studies, 2008). During the 2008-2009 school year, the number of doctoral degrees granted had increased to over 57,000 and the number of master's degrees was over 503,000 (Bell, 2010). Graduate school is designed to prepare individuals for a focused career by providing greater specialization in a specific discipline (Geiger, 2007). For those interested in a career in student affairs, the graduate school experience can include obtaining a master's degree in College Student Personnel (CSP). College Student Personnel graduate programs have been in existence since 1914 and today total over 130 programs. They may hold names such as student affairs and higher education, educational leadership, and higher education administration, in addition to CSP (ACPA, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the title student affairs preparation program was used.

Student affairs master's programs offer a variety of courses including the history of higher education, student development theory, and legal issues in higher education. Although there is no set specific curriculum each program is required to offer, there are standards promoted by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), which is an organization representing a variety of higher education associations (CAS, 2009). Standards are also offered in, *The Book for Professional Standards in Higher Education* (CAS, 2009), and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2010) offers guidelines for preparation programs. Regardless of which standards or guidelines are selected, there is no mechanism to assure that student affairs preparation programs are adhering to the standards

(Komives, 1998). In addition to these standards and guidelines, within the field of student affairs, many researchers have studied the competencies necessary for success as student affairs professionals. One of the most recent lists of competencies suggests ten competency areas ranging from advising and helping to ethical professional practice to student learning and development (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Although providing guidelines and listing competencies is helpful for determining what the content of student affairs program curricula should be, and for generating ideas as to what the structure of the student affairs program should look like, little attention has been paid to the process of how individuals learn while in these programs. Of the limited research that has been done, it suggests that graduate school is a potentially powerful time in regard to the complexity with which students are processing their graduate program experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Quaye, 2007; Rogers, Magolda, Baxter Magolda, & Knight-Abowitz, 2004). In an effort to add to the research, this study examined how graduate students made meaning of their graduate school experiences and the environmental conditions that promoted the process of making meaning.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of theories shaped this study. Constructive-developmental theory, specifically Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authorship theories guided the formation of the research questions and the data collection and analysis. Specifically, constructive-developmental theory includes exploring the intrapersonal dimension, an internally generated belief system, the interpersonal dimension, the way in which one sees oneself in relation to others, and the cognitive

dimension, how one makes sense of information. In constructive-developmental theories, each of the three dimensions, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, evolve over time from simple to complex, and individuals, to make meaning of their experiences, continually use all three.

An additional theory used in this study was Conyne and Clack's (1981) environment of reference model. Although not used as a foundation for the data collection process, Conyne and Clack's model did provide structure to the exploration of conditions within the environment that promoted the development of self-authorship. The model consists of three components, physical, social, and institutional, as well as the interactions between the components. Strange and Banning's (2001) campus design, Baxter Magolda's (2004) learning partnerships model, as well as Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) transition theory were also used in the data analysis process. Strange and Banning's design was used to expand the definition of Conyne and Clack's original model components, while both Baxter Magolda's learning partnerships model offered understanding as to the relationships between the environmental conditions that surfaced and the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. Finally, Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition theory offered meaning to the various roles of the environmental conditions. Each of these theories provided the framework for this study to explore how participants made meaning of their student affairs program experiences.

Constructive-Developmental Theory

Constructive-developmental theory allows for the exploration of the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions within the structure individuals use to

make meaning. Individuals use both of these dimensions to gather information and then process it through the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions as part of a single mental activity to make meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As individuals experience dissonance in how they make meaning, each of the three dimensions evolves thereby creating greater complexity in how meaning is made.

Both Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda's (2001) theories are constructive-developmental theories. Kegan's theory proposed that individuals begin making meaning at birth and continue to make meaning until death. Baxter Magolda's research examined individuals in the college years and beyond. Both Kegan and Baxter Magolda identified an evolutionary status that individuals' meaning making structures can reach. In this evolutionary status individuals use the three dimensions in such a way that they interact with the world using their own internal value and belief system, which in turn allows them to author for themselves the interactions they have with the world around them. This evolutionary status is called self-authorship, and development toward it was a primary assumption of this study. Both Kegan and Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001, 2009) defined self-authorship as a phase of development in which individuals are able to holistically make meaning. It is characterized by internally, rather than externally, defining one's beliefs, values, and internal loyalties. Individuals who are self-authored are able to take internal responsibility for their thoughts, actions, feelings, and are able to reflect on and accept contradictory feelings (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010).

Environmental Conditions

Early on, many development theorists (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009) paid little attention to the environment; instead they focused primarily on the internal developmental processes of the individuals. It was not until the 1970s that the interaction between campuses and students was identified (Aulepp & Delworth, 1976; Banning, 1978; Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Huebner, 1979). Several themes of these theories include (Strange & Banning, 2001):

- campus environments contain elements that connect to students' sense making
- students shape campus environments just as campus environments shape students
- students are able to make choices about the environmental influences
- each student has the capacity for a wide range of behaviors and environments should be intentionally shaped to promote development
- students will try to cope with any campus environment within which they find themselves
- given the differences among students, the campus environment must contain a variety of sub-environments to connect to all students
- every campus has a design even if not outwardly planned or known
- to successfully design a campus environment, input must be gathered from all agents that interact with the campus environment.

Conyne and Clack (1981) offer an environment of reference model that corresponds to, and served as a foundation for the above themes. Conyne and Clack's model was

used within this study for the purposes of offering structure to the environmental conditions that promoted the development of self-authorship.

Conyne and Clack (1981)'s model is based on a broad definition of the environment and is composed of three components and factor. This study used Strange and Banning's (2001) campus design to inform the definition of the components within Conyne and Clack's model broadening the components of the environment even more. The three components are: physical, including both natural and built pieces; social, which are the people and their relationships; and institutional, or laws and policies. Conyne and Clack labeled the interaction of the components with each other as the effect components.

For this study, the environment of reference model helped identify where in the environment the conditions that promoted the process of self-authorship were found. These conditions were then explored for their connection to the meaning making structure through the use of the learning partnerships model (Baxter Magolda, 2004). The LPM is a set of three assumptions and three principles designed intentionally to connect to the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development so as to promote the process of self-authorship. Finally, Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition theory helped to understand the environmental conditions that surfaced as the participants experienced transition. Schlossberg et al.'s transition theory reflects the transition process from an individual's perspective as he or she experiences change. Although the environment of reference model, the learning partnerships model, and transition theory all aided in the exploration of the environmental conditions, the conditions themselves surfaced from the data.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how graduate students made sense of their graduate school experiences and to identify what in the graduate school environment fostered their meaning making experiences. More specifically, graduate students who attended a student affairs preparation program were the focus of this study. Finally, how student affairs graduate students made sense of their graduate school experience in regard to the process of self-authorship grounded the study in the assumption that individuals are on a trajectory leading to complexity regarding how they make meaning and that the development of self-authorship is a place on that trajectory. The study was also conducted with the assumption that the graduate school environment may influence where graduates of a student affairs preparation program are on the trajectory.

Guiding Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this study:

- (1) What is the process of self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs master's program?
- (2) What are the environmental conditions that promote self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs master's program?

Research Design

The epistemological assumptions that guided this study are constructivist. A constructivist epistemology presumes that the self is central to knowledge construction (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009), that multiple realities exist, and that these realities are context bound (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Constructivism was a proper fit

for this study because it allowed for a focus on how individuals use their personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions to make meaning of their graduate program experience.

The methodology that was used in this study was narrative inquiry, which suited the study because the focus was on individual meaning-making. Narrative inquiry allows participants to share their experience in narrative form and for the exploration of the wholeness of experience from the participant's view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Shank, 2002). The narratives used in this study were gathered through three semi-structured, in-depth, interviews (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The approach to narrative analysis was the categorical-content approach (Lieblich et al., 1998). This approach used the constant comparative method for data analysis, which included identifying and exploring themes within and across each of the narratives. These themes were then used to compose not only the narratives of each participant but also the primary story that transcended all of the individual narratives. More detail about this study's research design is found within Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the literature and field of student affairs significantly in three ways. First, this study contributed to the research on graduate preparation for student affairs professionals by providing insight into the process of how graduate students are making sense of their graduate school experiences. This is significant because practitioners and researchers have offered numerous competency or knowledge areas necessary for student affairs professionals but have paid little

attention to how those competency or knowledge areas are being understood by individuals within graduate school. Insight into how competency areas are being learned is important because many of the competency areas themselves are multifaceted and therefore require complex meaning to be made. For example, multicultural competency is not as simple as just focusing on understanding how an individual sees oneself, but also includes understanding the systems of oppression that function in society, and how to make responsible decisions as a student affairs practitioner to overcome those systems (Pope & Mueller, 2011; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Understanding how individuals within graduate programs are making meaning of this and other competency areas can provide insight into what structures are needed within the environment to encourage complex understanding.

Second, this study provides empirical evidence related to self-authorship at the graduate student level. Of the studies on self-authorship that have been conducted, most focus on undergraduate students (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Of those that have included graduate students, either the studies were not intentionally designed to explore only the graduate student experience (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004) or focus only on doctoral students (Jones, 2009).

Finally, in 1986 Moos concluded that the, “arrangement of environments is perhaps the most powerful technique we have for influencing human behavior” (p. 4). If specific environmental conditions within student affairs graduate programs are found to promote self-authorship, then those conditions can potentially transfer to

other graduate experiences. Educators who acquire a more sophisticated understanding of human environments, “will be better positioned to eliminate those features of institutions that are needlessly stressful or uninhibiting, and ultimately, to create those features that will challenge students toward active learning, growth, and development” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 4). In today’s ever-changing world, achieving self-authorship is necessary. Self-authorship allows an individual the opportunity to learn how to learn for him or herself rather than concentrating on what to learn (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Individuals who are self-authored can critically analyze information, disagree respectfully, no longer fear other’s reactions, and make responsible choices (Baxter Magolda, 2009). All of these are skills are necessary to navigate successfully the profession of student affairs, as well as life (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004).

Definition of Terms

Several terms are used throughout the study for which it would be helpful to establish a definition. The first is to establish what is meant by meaning-making structure. My use of meaning-making structures is grounded in Kegan’s (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) constructive-developmental theories of self-authorship. A meaning-making structure refers to the principles around which individuals organize their thinking and feeling. These principles are established through experiences in which individuals learn how the world works (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009). The meaning-making structure is then used to interpret or new experiences, and when experiences are encountered that cannot be understood,

the principles that compose the meaning making structure adjust and evolve. In this sense, a meaning-making structure does not refer to the content of the meaning made, but rather the process of how the meaning is made. So, when a participant is said to be making meaning, attention is called to the structure with which the participant is making meaning.

The second term to be defined is that of a student affairs preparation program. Within this study, the term “student affairs preparation program” refers to a master’s-level, two-year student affairs program that meets the professional preparation standards set forth by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2009).

Summary

This study was designed to explore the process of self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs graduate program. Identification of environmental conditions that promote the development of self-authorship was also a focus of this study. This study rested upon the assumption that individuals are on a course leading toward greater complexity within how one makes meaning and that self-authorship is a place along that trajectory. This study also rests on the assumption that graduate school may promote individuals movement on that trajectory. My hope is that this study contributed to the conversation about the graduate school experience and what is needed to prepare practitioners to be successful in the field of student affairs.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter examines the literature relating to the graduate school experience, the development of self-authorship, what is known about the environmental conditions that promote such development, and the need for student affairs professionals to be self-authored. The purpose of reviewing this literature is to provide information about the research questions asked, and to illustrate the importance of the research questions. The chapter begins with a brief history of graduate education and the emergence of student affairs preparation programs. This is followed by an analysis of the current focus on competency building rather than the process by which students acquire those competencies in graduate school. Next, how graduate students make meaning of their graduate school experiences is explored, with attention paid to cognitive-structural, constructive-developmental theories, and self-authorship theory. Kegan's (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda's (2001) theories are specifically addressed, as is the research about undergraduate and graduate students' development toward self-authorship. After that, what is known about environmental conditions that contribute to the development of self-authorship are explored, with particular attention given to the environment of reference model, the learning partnerships model, and transition theory. Finally, the issues of accountability, increased amount of information, an increasingly diverse student population, and the acknowledgement that student affairs professionals are partners with faculty in the creation of a learning-centered environment are explored as examples of the need for student affairs professionals to be self-authored.

Graduate School Programs

In 2008, more than 1.5 million students were seeking a graduate degree (Bell, 2010). The purpose of graduate education is to allow students to focus their learning on a specialized discipline, as well as to become socialized professionally (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011; Geiger, 2007). Graduate programs, both master's and doctoral, flourished when institutions of higher education became more segmented by establishing schools, colleges, and departments. Such dividing of the institution allowed for resources and faculty to be used both by undergraduate and graduate programs (Gumport, 2005). This division permitted the focus of undergraduate education to be more general, and, with greater faculty involvement, graduate education allowed for more focused coursework specific to an area or discipline. The establishment of undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as schools, colleges, and departments, also permitted selectivity regarding those who were admitted to graduate programs, reinforcing graduate study as in-depth, content specific education.

Education and business have the largest number of graduate students enrolled with total enrollment of 21% and 16%, respectively (Bell, 2010). Although not all graduate programs are the same, they all have the common purpose of advancing individuals' professional skills, knowledge, and abilities in relation to a specific content area (Geiger, 2007). Furthermore, graduate programs, "now routinely assist individuals to catch up with the rapid proliferation of specialized knowledge in a variety of fields; and are frequently utilized by persons seeking professional advancement" (Geiger, 2007, p. 328).

Student Affairs Graduate Programs

For individuals interested in student affairs as a profession, attending graduate school is encouraged. Specifically, enrollment in a student affairs master's program is commonplace. Although graduate programs, in general, began to be established at the end of the nineteenth century, student personnel programs did not develop until the twentieth century. The first graduate program designed to educate student affairs professionals was established at Columbia University's Teachers College, and the first Master of Arts degree was awarded in 1914. Today, over 130 master's and doctoral degree programs in student affairs are listed in the *Directory of Graduate Preparation Programs in College Student Personnel* (ACPA, 2009).

The purpose of participating in a student affairs graduate program is similar to the purpose of graduate education in general. Student affairs programs allow for individuals to be socialized professionally in the field of student affairs (Komives, 1998). They also provide students the opportunity to focus their studies on content related specifically to student affairs administration. One way in which student affairs graduate programs are different from other graduate programs is that there is not one specific undergraduate major required for admission (Komives, 1998). Instead, those who are accepted into student affairs graduate programs have a variety of academic backgrounds. Regardless of academic undergraduate preparation, those admitted into a student affairs graduate program have applied to receive a master's degree within a helping profession. Participation in student affairs preparation programs is looked upon favorably, as it is acknowledged that those who spend time studying the field of student affairs bring skills and knowledge to the student affairs

jobs they obtain (Carpenter, 2003). Furthermore, it is assumed that the preparation necessary for student affairs professionals to succeed in the field occurs in these programs. A factor that contributes to the successful preparation of those within student affairs programs is the identification of field-relevant content areas that are to be learned.

Student Affairs Content Areas

Although both of the *Student Personnel Point of View* foundational documents (American Council on Higher Education [ACHE], 1937; 1949) identify holistic development as a purpose of the profession, both documents encouraged student affairs professionals to achieve this purpose by shaping their practice to address content areas segmented by specific student needs. For example, “orienting students to feel at home at the institution” (ACHE, 1949, p. 21), “providing satisfactory living conditions” (ACHE, p. 22), and, “understanding and control of financial resources” (ACHE, p. 24) are three areas of content identified. Numerous studies have also been conducted examining specific outcomes in student affairs graduate programs (Castellanos, Gloria, Mayorga, & Salas, 2007; Flowers, 2003; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Herdlein, 2004; Young & Janosik, 2007). For example, Castellanos et al. (2007) used self-report data to explore multicultural competency as an outcome of student affairs graduate programs, while Flowers (2003), examined the outcome of a required diversity course within student affairs graduate programs. Despite the exploration of specific outcomes, it was the articulation of competency domains, which first occurred in 1981 (Ostroth, 1981) that began a push for a unified knowledge base for student affairs, regardless of the content area one’s practice addressed.

The term competency “implies a level of understanding and confidence that must be reached before one can hope to perform at a satisfactory level” (Carpenter, 2003, p. 573). For student affairs professionals, competency involves becoming proficient in a variety of content areas. Ostroth (1981) listed interpersonal, cooperative working relationships, and administrative and organizational skills as competencies for student affairs professionals. This same set of skills was found to be important by Pope and Reynolds (1997) who expanded the list of competencies to include: theory and translation, ethical and legal issues, teaching and training, assessment and evaluation, and multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Another list of competencies was offered by Saunders and Cooper (1999) who found that personnel management, leadership, communication, and student contact were the most important competencies for student affairs professionals to possess. Similarly, an emphasis on administration, management, and human facilitation skills as competencies for successful student affairs professionals was found through the research of Lovell and Kosten (2000).

Woodard and Komives (2003) identified a more contemporary list of student affairs competencies that, like the other lists, included interpersonal and administrative competencies. In addition, according to Woodard and Komives, multiculturalism, leadership, teaching, counseling and helping skills, advising and consultation, conflict resolution, community building and programming, assessment and evaluation, and professionalism are areas in which student affairs professionals need to become competent.

The most recent set of competencies published for the profession of student affairs is *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (APCA & NASPA, 2010). Areas articulated in this report are: advising and helping; assessment, evaluation and research; equity; diversity and inclusion; ethical professional practice; history, philosophy and values; human and organizational resources; law, policy, and governance; leadership; personal foundations; and student learning and development. Again, there is some overlap between this and previous competency sets, (e.g., helping skills, leadership). However, as Pope and Reynolds noted in 1997, there is “no consensus about core competencies for student affairs practitioners” (p. 268).

Given that there is no agreement on one official set of competencies necessary for success in student affairs, it is not surprising that there is no universal curriculum for all student affairs graduate preparation programs. However, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) does set forth standards and guidelines for student affairs master’s degree programs.

Common Curriculum and CAS Standards and Guidelines

Identifying competencies for student affairs graduate programs is not new. Indeed, in 1964 the Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (COSPA)’s Joint Commission on Professional Development drafted the document, *A Proposal for Professional Preparation in College Student Personnel Work*, and by 1967 the words “proposal for” had been changed to “guidelines for” (Miller, 1991). In 1979, ACPA adopted the standards set forth by the Preparation Standards Statement Drafting Committee created to establish both standards and serve as an

accreditation vehicle for counselors and personnel administrators (Miller, 1991). More recently, Winston, Creamer, and Miller (2001) identified specific content that student affairs graduate preparation programs should include, and, although it varies little from the general competency areas identified for professionals, there are some differences. Among the differences are the content areas of technology and finance and budgeting. Others have also identified content areas for student affairs graduate programs. Rogers and Love (2004) identified spirituality and the meaning of life as one such content area, while Burkard, Cole, Ott, and Stoflet (2004) identified human relations. Finally, Kuk, Cobb, and Forrest (2007) identified four competency areas, “individual practice and administration skills, professional knowledge content, goal setting and the ability to deal with change, and managing organizations and groups” (p. 679). The assumption behind competencies or content areas being identified and established for student affairs graduate programs is that if they are taught then those graduating from the programs will be competent in those areas (Burkard et al., 2004; Carpenter, 2003; Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Rogers & Love, 2004).

Since 1979, CAS has been promoting standards in a variety of student affairs functional areas for the purpose of assisting student affairs professionals as they bring the processes of learning and development into the experiences they offer students. CAS is comprised of “over 40 member organizations that comprise a professional constituency of over 100,000 professionals” (CAS, 2009). CAS offers both standards and guidelines, with standards being the requirements necessary to comply, and guidelines serving as enhancements to the standards, but are not required (Miller,

1991). The standards that CAS defines for student affairs programs are for the master's-level programs. As written in the standards:

The formal education of students, consisting of curriculum and co-curriculum, must promote student learning and development outcomes that are purposeful and holistic and that prepare students for satisfying and productive lifestyles, work, and civic participation. The student learning and development outcome domains and their related dimensions are: knowledge acquisition, integration, construction, and application, cognitive complexity, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, humanitarianism and civic engagement, and practical competence. (CAS, 2009, p. 2)

The assumption is that graduate programs can be structured to meet the CAS standards, and that because the CAS standards are met, individuals will have achieved a certain common level of learning and development. Furthermore, they require student affairs preparation programs to, “identify relevant and desirable student learning and development outcomes from among the six domains and related dimensions” (p. 239), with the six domains being: knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence. Thus, the responsibility to shape the environment is left to students and faculty (Miller, 1991).

Although there is no stated direct connection, many of the learning and development outcomes CAS calls for can be linked to the competencies identified for student affairs professionals. For example, equity, diversity, and inclusion is

identified as a competency area by ACPA and NASPA's (2010) *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners*, and appears to be similar to the humanitarianism and civic engagement learning and development outcome listed within the CAS standards. It makes sense then that individuals graduating from programs that follow the CAS standards will meet some of the competencies identified for student affairs professionals. Despite the identification of learning and development outcomes by CAS for student affairs preparation programs, the student affairs profession as a whole has not adopted one specific set of competencies and the focus on content remains strong.

Competencies Versus Process of Learning

There has been much focus on what is being learned through the identification of competencies for student affairs professionals, or the identification of standards for student affairs preparation programs, yet limited attention has been paid to the process of how individuals are learning or acquiring those competencies. Of the research that has been done, Weiner, Hickmott, Brescianai and Felix (2009), examined the competencies identified for student affairs professionals within 17 documents published by ACPA, NASPA, and CAS and identified eight learning goals. Kuk et al.'s, (2007) research on perceptions of competencies among entry-level professionals asked if the competencies taught within student affairs preparation programs are needed, and also called upon those shaping preparation programs to assess and evaluate the connections being made between the, "experiential practicum and intern experiences and the knowledge-based curriculum" (p. 680).

Jones (2007) articulated that within the student affairs profession, “we are overly focused on outcomes and not process” (p. 4). By focusing so much on outcomes, or competencies, the content of what is needed to become a student affairs professional can quickly become a checklist, and attention does not get paid to how individuals are making meaning of the outcomes or competencies (Jones, 2007). Even when the profession of student affairs has focused on the process, such as the PREPARE method asserted by Komives and Carpenter (2009), which stands for, “purposeful, research/theory based, experience based, peer reviewed, assessed, reflected, and evaluated” (p. 381) it is unclear which set of competencies or outcomes should be followed. By focusing on both process and outcomes, the profession of student affairs can better assist student affairs professionals in the achievement of any identified set of competencies or outcomes.

Student affairs preparation programs can also be shaped intentionally so that the graduate school learning environment supports the graduation of individuals who are more complex in their understanding and application of student affairs competencies. Such intentionality potentially already exists within student affairs graduate programs through requirements such as internships and practica that enable students to acquire practical, hands-on experience within the field of student affairs (Komives, 1998; Miller, 1991). Another example of how graduate students achieve competencies necessary for success as student affairs professionals is the identification that the process of learning helping skills starts with one’s self. This process is often demonstrated through the requirement of graduate course assignments requiring self-reflection and analysis. What is achieved by focusing on

both what individuals should be learning, as well as how they are learning is individuals who are able to:

reflect and model the long-held values and commitments of the profession, engage in critical thinking and questioning, while working toward learning outcomes deemed necessary for productive and contributing lives—for themselves as student affairs educators and the undergraduate students with whom they will be working. (Jones, 2007, p. 6)

Examining the process of how those enrolled in student affairs graduate programs are making meaning of their graduate program experiences is, therefore, worthwhile. The graduate school experience has been identified as a possible developmental time for students (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006; Quaye, 2007; Rogers et al., 2004), yet limited research exists examining how graduate students make meaning of their experiences within student affairs graduate programs.

Theories On How Meaning Is Made

Cognitive-Structural Theories

Cognitive-structural theories have typically been used to better understand “how people think, reason, and make meaning of their experiences” (Evans et al., 2009, p. 43). Within these theories, the mind is believed to use a set of structures, composed of assumptions developed through experiences that are then used to make meaning of information. The structures act as filters for determining how individuals come to understand and make sense of their experiences, and evolve toward greater complexity as individuals have new experiences (Bornstein & Lamb, 2005). For cognitive-structural theorists, evolution of the structures takes place through

dissonance and occurs in the same order regardless of cultural conditions (Evans, 2011).

Piaget. In 1954, Piaget offered one of the first cognitive-structural theories. He labeled as schema the structures that the mind uses to make meaning (Piaget, 1954, 1965). According to Piaget, individuals use schema to either assimilate or accommodate experiences within their environment. When individuals use their schema to assimilate, they fit the information of their experiences into their existing schema. When individuals use their schema to accommodate, the schema change in order to make sense of new information, and this changing of schema is referred to as a transition period (Piaget, 1954, 1965).

Perry. In 1970, Perry built upon the work of Piaget in his cognitive-structural theory. According to Perry, there are nine positions individuals move through as they go from making meaning dichotomously, right versus wrong, to reconfirming personal commitments in a world of conditional knowledge and values. Primarily focusing on how individuals make meaning, Perry's theory explored both intellectual and ethical development. A major weakness of Perry's theory is that it was created from data gathered from all White male research participants at a prestigious higher education institution. This is a drawback because Perry's theory has been widely generalized to all college students, yet the majority of today's college students do not match the sample upon which Perry's work was founded. Instead, the majority of today's college students are women; students are more ethnically and racially diverse than during Perry's time; and they are attending a variety of institutions including for profit, online, and other non-traditional ones (Ryi, 2010).

Gender and cognitive-structural theories. Theorists who followed Perry continued to focus on how individuals make meaning of their experiences by focusing on the cognitive dimension yet challenged Perry's theory based on the population from which he drew his data. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) explored how women make meaning, or women's intellectual development in their phenomenological research. They referred to the different ways of knowing as perspectives rather than stages, and found that for women the development "of voice, mind, and self are intertwined" (p. 18). The five perspectives Belenky et al., discovered are: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. These are not intended to represent the complex thought process of an individual but are to be used to provide insight. A strength of Belenky et al.'s theory is that it was based on female participants representing a variety of backgrounds, however, a weakness was that it was difficult to determine if the perspectives discovered were hierarchical in nature.

Similarly, Baxter Magolda (1992) discovered patterns related to gender regarding individual's cognitive development through her longitudinal study. The result of Baxter Magolda's study is the epistemological reflection model, which contains four stages: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. Baxter Magolda identified patterns within each stage and discovered that these patterns were gender-related. A major limitation of Baxter Magolda's study, despite representation from both genders, was that her participants were predominantly traditional aged, White, and from middle class families.

Ethics and cognitive-structural theories. The ethical development questions Perry raised in his original theory of the cognitive dimension were also further explored by King and Kitchener (1994) through their creation of the Reflective Judgment Model [RJM], which is a seven stage model. Despite the RJM being based on data from more than 1,700 people, questions have been raised about gender differences and the need for them to be explored more through qualitative research.

Ethical development continued to be investigated by Kohlberg (1975) through his theory of moral development, and Gilligan (1982) in her theory of women's moral development. Kohlberg identified three stages, and Gilligan articulated three levels and two transition periods. Critiques of Kohlberg's theory include his use of a stage model, his claim of cultural universality, and his focus on justice as a basis for moral reasoning. Perhaps the biggest critique came in the form of Gilligan's theory. Kohlberg, having gathered data solely from men, determined that women are not able to reach the same developmental stage as men. Gilligan discovered that women are able to achieve just as complex levels of moral reasoning as men. Rather, their path is different.

Contributions from cognitive-structural theories. Although each of these theories adds to the understanding of how individuals make sense of their experiences, they are all limited in regard to how they examined the complexity of the actual meaning making structure by defining it through only the cognitive dimension. They do, however, all demonstrate that a developmental progression occurs as individuals move through life experiences, and that cognitively, individuals make

sense of their experiences in different ways. This same assumption is one of the underlying assumptions of constructive-developmental theory.

Constructive-Developmental Theory

Similar to cognitive-structural theory, constructive-developmental theory builds upon the work of Piaget (1954, 1965) and explores the transformation in how people construct meaning. However, unlike cognitive-structural theories that focus on how meaning is made through the cognitive dimension, constructive-developmental theory broadens the focus of how meaning is made by not limiting how individuals make meaning to just one dimension. Constructive-developmental theory is grounded in two assumptions (Boes et al., 2010). The first assumption is constructivism. Constructivism is the belief that, “individuals make meaning in the space between their experiences and their reactions to them” (Boes et al., 2010, p. 5). The meaning that is made is connected to an individual’s current way of making meaning and it is through this process of connection and adjustment that learning occurs.

The second assumption is that the underlying structure of how individuals come to know is developmental in nature (Boes et al., 2010). Kegan (1982, 1994) identified the subject-object balance as the process through which individuals organize their experiences in regard to how they think, feel, and relate to others. Subject refers to “elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). Object is, “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate

upon” (p. 32). Individuals, through experiences, move what is subject to object, and as this happens developmental changes occur in how individuals come to know.

Through constructive-developmental theory, the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of development are explored in addition to the cognitive dimension making the constructive-developmental theoretical approach more holistic than cognitive-structural theories. Constructive-developmental theory also allows for attention to be paid to how personal and contextual influences impact the meaning making process and the progression of each from simple to complex. In this study, self-authorship theory was the specific constructive-developmental theory used.

Self-Authorship Theory

Self-authorship theory broadens what is examined and defined as the meaning making structure. Self-authorship theory, built on the constructive-developmental research of Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), is based, like cognitive-structural theories, on the assumption that people are constantly evolving in regard to how they make sense of and interact with the world around them. According to constructive-developmental theory and therefore self-authorship theory, the structures individuals use to make meaning are composed not just of the cognitive dimension, or how one makes sense of knowledge, but also the interpersonal dimension, or the way in which one sees oneself in relation to others, and the intrapersonal dimension, or an internally generated belief system. The individual, when making meaning of experiences, continually uses each dimension composing the meaning-making structure, and the dimensions move toward complexity as the individual works to make meaning of new, more complex experiences. This structure of intertwined

dimensions evolves over time as individuals continually develop how they organize their thoughts, feelings, and relationships based on their life experiences.

Kegan's Theory of Self-Authorship

Kegan's theory of self-authorship is a lifespan constructive-developmental theory (Kegan 1982, 1994). In both of his works, *The Evolving Self* (1982) and *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (1994), Kegan offered a theory of how humans organize the meaning that they make throughout their lifetime using a subject object balance structure composed of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. In his first book, *The Evolving Self*, Kegan asserted a developmental model built upon the work of Piaget (1954, 1965), Erikson (1950), Kohlberg (1975), and Perry (1970). Kegan, himself, acknowledged that his theory at that time lacked empirical evidence.

In his second book, *In Over Our Heads* (1994), Kegan took into account Gilligan's (1982) and Belenky et al.'s (1986) work, which stressed the difference between men's and women's cognitive development. He also offered greater empirical evidence to support his theory based on interview data collected from various studies intended to test the subject object balance (Kegan, 1994). More recently, Kegan's theory has been explored in regard to race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and social class issues (Abes & Jones, 2004; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Torres, 2009; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Such exploration is a response to criticism that Kegan's theory (1982, 1994) did not allow enough room for individuals' unique aspects of identity

(Soldz, 1988). What remained consistent throughout Kegan's work are the five orders of consciousness his theory identifies.

Kegan's five orders of consciousness rest upon a continuum of increasing complexity using a subject object balance, which is what individuals use to organize the meaning they make of their experiences. In the subject object balance, what is subject is what is embedded to the individuals, what simply "is," while what is object is what individuals are able to reflect upon. As Kegan pointed out, "we have object; we are subject... We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect on that which we are subject" (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). As individuals' subject object balance evolves through the five orders of consciousness, the meaning-making structure changes what is subject into what is object in order to meet the processing demands of the individuals and a new subject object balance is created. This evolution of what was subject to object creates a new set of experiences that are subjective to individuals, and the process begins again as meaning is made of what is now subject.

Specifically, as individuals transition from one order to the next, the prior way of making meaning for the individuals becomes differentiated from the individuals' perspective. It becomes object. This way of making meaning is then integrated as individuals become familiar with the subject object balance of the new order and begin to use that to make meaning. Such transitions occur for individuals in response to environmental complexity and challenge that causes one's current order of making meaning to be too narrow and simplistic for effective adaptation, sense making, and survival. According to Kegan (1982, 1994), this evolution of the meaning making

structure is an ongoing process from birth to death and occurs through five orders of consciousness.

First order of consciousness. The first order of consciousness for Kegan occurs when individuals move from believing that the people and objects within the world come and go and do not have any permanence to becoming aware of the self and the world (Kegan, 1994). At this order of consciousness, the subject object balance, or understanding of self and other, is composed in such a way that the world itself is what is subject to the individual. Specifically, perceptions and impulses are subject, while movements and sensations are object. As the world, and the objects and people within the world, become more permanent, the people and objects within the world become more object and thereby consistent (Kegan, 1994). This subject object balance, regarding what is permanent in the world, is how individuals in the first order of consciousness understand and interact with the world.

An example of the first order of consciousness can be understood when exploring the behavior of babies. Often babies perceive that when their parents are out of sight they are gone and will not return. This often results in impulsive crying in an effort to communicate that they are unhappy with their parents' absence. It takes babies time to realize that the perception of their parents as temporary is false, and that their parents have not left forever but will return later (Bornstein & Lamb, 2005).

Second order of consciousness. In Kegan's second order of consciousness, because familiar people and objects in the world have become more permanent for the individual, the primary characteristic of the meaning-making structure is being

self-centered (Kegan, 1994). Here, individuals have as subject their own needs and preferences, while their perceptions and impulses are now object. In the second order of consciousness, individuals are comfortable using their meaning-making structure in such a way that they recognize that people and entities exist outside of themselves, and that each object in the world has a set of preferences and abilities that are stable and can be distinguished from other people and other entities (Kegan, 1994). This is what Kegan called the principle of durable categories (Kegan, 1994). The balance that is achieved in the second order of consciousness enables individuals to have as subject their beliefs, emotions, and acts, while what is outside the self is object.

An example of the second order of consciousness is a student who wants to get an A in a course. The student wants this A because the student believes that getting an A is right and the A is needed for the future. In order to achieve the A the student expects the instructor to tell him or her what he or she needs to know. To this student, the answer for how to get an A is known by the instructor and all that needs to be done is for the instructor to tell him or her how to get the A and the student will be able to achieve the grade. In this example, if the instructor were to invite the student to participate in the process of figuring out what is needed to get an A, the student has potential to become frustrated. The student is using his or her meaning-making structure in such a way that the knowledge necessary to get an A lies outside him or herself and the student only needs to be able to find or identify the knowledge to obtain an A. To the individual, if the information required for an A rested within him or herself, he or she would already be using the information to get an A. If the instructor wants the individual to think more abstractly and engage more reflectively

about the process of achieving the A, the third order of consciousness must be achieved.

Third order of consciousness. In the third order of consciousness, individuals use their meaning-making structure in such a way that what was subject in the second order of consciousness, their needs and preferences, as well as their understanding of information as cause and effect, is now object (Kegan, 1994). This new subject object balance results in their now being able to look at experiences from another's point of view and reflect on others' emotions, as well as their own. Individuals are now, "capable of loyalty to a community of people or ideas larger than themselves" (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). The ability to be more objective while making sense of the world is an important developmental step. Essentially, this step is what it means for an individual to be socialized; "we become truly a part of society (rather than its ward or charge) when society has become truly a part of us" (Kegan, 1994, p. 76). At the third order of consciousness, what are subject to individuals are their values and ideals, as well as their understanding that relationships are reciprocal.

Drinking excessively in college can be an example of the third order of consciousness. Individuals may not have chosen to drink in large amount or drink at all prior to attending a college or university, and they might recognize that drinking is not in their best interest. Choosing not to drink, or drinking in moderation, may have been the choice behavior because while living at home with parents choosing to drink had a specific consequence that stood in the way of obtaining something of self interest. Once individuals leave for college, that certain consequence is removed and they are given freedom to make choices with seemingly fewer external consequences.

At this place, individuals are attempting to make meaning of their experiences for themselves, and look at others to find out what to do. They notice how and why others are making choices and the culture of the undergraduate student community becomes subject to the students. If binge drinking is a norm in the undergraduate student community then, because the culture of that community is subject to the individuals, binge drinking becomes a behavior that is adopted.

Fourth order of consciousness. In the fourth order of consciousness, individuals see themselves and others, knowledge, feelings, and morals as part of a complex system (Kegan, 1994). This consciousness allows them to gain perspective on how they and others are making meaning. In the fourth order of consciousness, individuals are able to arbitrate between themselves and others, between one set of ideas and another, as well as parts of each. Kegan (1994) saw this capacity developing as a consequence of the demands of modern life where change is constant and diversity is a fact of life. For Kegan, the demands of modern life mean that individuals must interact with the world in such a way as to view experiences from their own perspectives as well as others. Individuals must be able to make responsible decisions that are congruent with their own values and beliefs, as well as take into consideration the needs of the community and world around them. According to Kegan, the fourth order of consciousness is necessary to successfully meet the demands of modern life, yet, “Among a composite sample of people from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds in the U.S., 79 percent have *not* reached the fourth order. This means that 21 percent of the sample reached the self-authoring level or beyond” (Debold, 2002, p. 7). At the fourth order of consciousness,

individuals achieve what Kegan labels self-authorship. At the fourth order of consciousness, individuals no longer are subject to the external world around them, nor are they subject to their own desires. Instead, individuals at this order are able to interact with the world using their internal value and belief system allowing them to author for themselves the interactions they have with the world around them.

An example of the fourth order of consciousness builds on the example offered for the third order of consciousness. Perhaps individuals that had been participating in excessive drinking from the third order of consciousness are now operating from the fourth order. These individuals might choose to reflect on who they are and realize that binge drinking behavior is not congruent with what they believe is necessary to have a good time. They are also able to see the negative effects on the community and are not comfortable contributing to that. These individuals might then choose to model responsible drinking. Some may begin to participate in student clubs and organizations that aim to combat binge drinking and its negative behaviors.

Fifth order of consciousness. This is the final order of consciousness. Here, individuals are able to give up possession of their internal belief systems for a new one that incorporates their own internal belief system as well as that of others (Kegan, 1994). Kegan (1994) referred to this order as the self-transforming order. In the fifth order, individuals are able to use their belief systems objectively and in doing so are able to see the limits of these systems. This allows individuals to adopt other systems and use them to navigate through contradictions, acknowledging that contradictions

are inevitable. According to Kegan, achieving the fifth order of consciousness is quite rare.

Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship draws upon both Perry's (1970) and Kegan's (1982, 1994) work, and defines the process through which individuals make meaning to include the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development. According to Baxter Magolda, just like Kegan, these three dimensions evolve toward complexity through the evolution of a subject object balance. Baxter Magolda based her theory on data from her longitudinal study of a cohort of college students. A weakness of Baxter Magolda's study is that all but three of her participants were White when she began her study, and the majority of her participants were traditional college-age. However, her participants were split evenly along gender lines. Although overlap can be found between the two theories, Baxter Magolda's theory differs from Kegan's through the articulation of four distinct phases: (a) following external formulas, (b) the crossroads, (c) becoming the author of one's own life, and (d) internal foundations. Baxter Magolda's theory (2001) is also based on empirical research, while Kegan, himself, acknowledged the need for empirical research upon the creation of his theory.

External formulas. Baxter Magolda (2004) described this meaning-making phase as one in which individuals are following external formulas from a self-focused position. According to Baxter Magolda (2001), these external formulas took the form of "prescribed plans or predetermined scripts" for successful adult life (p. 71). These plans or scripts are written through individuals' attempts to function independently.

They internalize external “shoulds” as they come to understand who they are through definitions of what they determine others think is appropriate. This can be heard when they are asked how they came about making independent decisions and within their response you hear others’ thoughts overshadowing their own.

The crossroads. The second phase of Baxter Magolda’s (2004) theory is when the crossroads internally “spark the search for meaning across all three dimensions” (p. 28) that compose the meaning-making structure: cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. At the crossroads, individuals become uncomfortable with how they are making sense of their experiences and begin to seek more internal definition. Here is where individuals within a student affairs graduate program might be found, given the differences in focus and environment from undergraduate experiences. For individuals at the crossroads, there might be a period of frustration or disillusionment as the individual’s internal voice clashes with, for instance, career expectations or relationship roles. For example, an individual who went to law school and became a practicing lawyer begins to consider choosing to quit the profession and looks into going back to school to become a teacher. This individual might experience others such as family, friends, and colleagues, pressuring him or her not to leave the profession and point to reasons such as money as justification for staying. The individual, however, while able to understand those arguments, feels as though he or she is at a crossroads in that he or she needs to make a choice for him or herself because continuing to be a practicing lawyer does not feel congruent with who he or she knows him or herself to be.

The capstone of the crossroads experiences occurs when an individual reaches the “snapping point” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 116). The snapping point is when an individual within the crossroads finds it impossible to go back to listening to others without question, while at the same time experiencing a force that interferes with the individual’s standing up for him or herself. This point is critical and the individual must find a way to progress through the experience and is therefore forced to define internally his or her beliefs.

For both Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2004), the place where individuals use an internally defined belief system is called self-authorship. For Kegan achieving self-authorship means that one has arrived at the fourth order of consciousness, and the individual is now able to participate in relationships objectively and is subject to his or her own internal belief system. For Baxter Magolda, there are two more steps to achieving self-authorship, and she labels these two steps: becoming the author of one’s own life, and the internal foundation. During Baxter Magolda’s next two phases, the individual experiences intense self-reflection ultimately resulting in the ability to define for him or her own self how he or she knows.

Becoming the author of one’s own life. During the first step of the self-authorship phase identified by Baxter Magolda (2004), becoming the author of one’s own life, the individual spends time reshaping what he or she believes, his or her sense of self, and his or her relationships with others. Individuals experience this step as being “shifted from ‘how you know’ to ‘how I know’” (p. 119) and the beginning of the process of choosing one’s own beliefs. The individual understands the inherent

uncertainty of knowledge and takes up the challenge of what it means for his or her beliefs and how to live out these beliefs. Focusing on “how I know” requires individuals to determine who the “I” is, which requires intense self-reflection and interaction with others that help gain perspective to choose their own values and identity. This results, sometimes, in individuals renegotiating some of their relationships. Individuals who are becoming the authors of their lives often talk about how they are reflecting on who they are and who they want to become; soul searching is common and openly shared in conversation. Such intense self-reflection often results in gaining perspective. For some, this means approaching life from a different vantage point. For others, it means making different choices in relationships and about one’s beliefs. Authoring one’s self through self-reflection becomes the core of all three dimensions of development. It is the result of an evolving consistency that comes with developing an internal system for making meaning of oneself, relations with others, and knowledge that leads to an internal foundation for making meaning. This internal foundation is the second step Baxter Magolda identifies for achieving self-authorship.

The internal foundation. The continual process of authoring all three dimensions results in the creation of an internal foundation from which individuals can guide their lives (Baxter Magolda, 2004). This foundation serves as the framework for answering the question of what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others. As an individual uses his or her internal foundation it solidifies further and provides a sense of self for the individual. This sense of self contributes to individuals’ abilities to choose their core beliefs and continually integrate them into

an internal belief system they use to guide their lives. The security of an internal foundation affords individuals the opportunity from which to engage in authentic, mutual relationships with others.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009), participants in her study described the establishment of an internal foundation as a feeling of peace and satisfaction. Rather than working toward answers or a finished product, participants who were internally defined were working toward increasingly satisfying definitions of themselves. In the process of becoming authors of their own lives, participants realized that they could not control the external world. Their ability to make meaning of the external world stemmed from their ability to make meaning of their internal world—the achievement of becoming authors of their own lives. Participants who had moved into the internal foundation portion of the journey took responsibility for making meaning of both their internal and external worlds. They actively used their internal foundations to approach the world, react to events beyond their control, and mediate their interactions with external circumstances. Getting in touch with the internal foundation helped participants simultaneously guide and accept their lives.

Both Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2009) and Kegan's (1982, 1994) theories of self-authorship are lifespan development theories. Lifespan development theories assume that development does not stop when individuals reach adulthood (Bornstein & Lamb, 2005). Therefore, although development during traditional college years is of interest, both theories of self-authorship extend beyond the college experiences. Of the research that does focus specifically on the experience of college students in regard to developing self-authorship most focuses on the undergraduate years.

Self-Authorship Research

Undergraduate Student Research

Although the focus of this dissertation is on graduate students' development of self-authorship, the few studies about undergraduate development are summarized to provide context. Pizzolato (2003) studied high-risk undergraduate college students and the development of self-authorship. Her research does not link self-authorship to a developmental model, but connects it to a coping mechanism that promotes good choices and an epistemological orientation (Pizzolato, 2004). Specifically, as high-risk students experience marginalization, they employ problem-focused coping strategies, such as self-regulatory coping which Pizzolato defined as, "After an initial emotional response to self-to-standard comparisons, these students became clear about their feelings and returned to their goals" (p. 435). Pizzolato was able to link coping strategies, like self-regulation, to the emergence of self-authorship.

Torres (2003) also studied undergraduate college students. Torres conducted a longitudinal study of 28 Latino/a college students from a variety of college environments and found links between ethnic identity, cognitive development, and the journey toward self-authorship. Torres and Hernandez (2007) went on to investigate further the impact of ethnic identity and college experiences for Latino/a undergraduate students and Torres, (2009) found that making meaning of racism can create developmental dissonance, which can lead to self-authorship.

Jones and McEwen (2000), as well as Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), promoted the model of multiple dimensions of identity and its connection to the meaning-making system as defined in self-authorship theory. This model highlights

the potential impact dimensions such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation can have on the way an individual makes meaning. Again, those studied were undergraduate college students.

Abes and Jones (2004) explored the connections between self-authorship and the meaning undergraduate students' make of their lesbian identity, as did Abes and Kasch (2007). Finally, the impact of participating in service-learning activities for majority students and how it connects to self-authorship was studied (Jones & Abes, 2004). Each of these studies focused on exploring the complexities of self-authorship for a specific population of undergraduate college students.

Much of the research on undergraduate students demonstrates that students could develop self-authorship, or do, while in college. Although most of the research on the development of self-authorship is focused on the undergraduate years, some research about the development of self-authorship for graduate students does exist.

Graduate Student Research

Of the limited body of literature focused on the development toward self-authorship of graduate students, both Rogers et al. (2004) and Quaye (2007) found graduate school to be a potentially powerful time for individuals' development. Specifically, Rogers et al. found that the core values, pedagogy, and the curriculum of a student affairs preparation program could be intentionally shaped to generate the promotion of self-authorship thereby making graduate school an influential developmental experience. Quaye supports this claim by providing an account of his own journey with his Black identity while enrolled in a student affairs graduate preparation program. Although Rogers et al. and Quaye discuss the same student

affairs program, each brings to focus the developmental opportunity of graduate school.

Baxter Magolda's (2009) longitudinal study on self-authorship, although not specifically focused on the context of graduate school, does provide insight into the self-authorship journey of those within graduate school and additional evidence that graduate school supports the development of self-authorship. A specific example from Baxter Magolda's study is the experience of Sandra. Sandra pursued a master's degree in social work, and during this time "she gained practical experience, compared her academic learning with her experience to judge its validity, and began crafting her professional identity" (p. 133). While Sandra pursued her graduate degree, she found herself comparing what she was learning to her work experience, and critically examined perspectives that were inconsistent with her perspective.

Although Baxter Magolda's (2009) study adds to the research regarding the development of self-authorship in graduate school, her study differed in two primary ways as related to this study. First, of the 70 participants she interviewed, only 21 pursued academic preparation after college, which included graduate school, but also law school, medical school, and other kinds of post-college academic preparation. Second, of those who attended graduate school, the specific graduate programs were not limited to student affairs, meaning that insights about graduate school from Baxter Magolda's study are insights about the development of self-authorship in graduate school in general.

Research about Graduate Education in Student Affairs

Most of the research on graduate education that is specific to student affairs programs examines how curricula of current programs prepares graduates for entry-level professional work (Burkard et al., 2004; Carpenter, 2003; Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). This body of research, which emphasizes the identification of content areas, does not address how students understand or make sense of their graduate school experiences. Of the limited research that has focused on the process of how graduate students are making meaning of their student affairs graduate program experiences little is known about the environmental conditions that promote the process.

Environmental Conditions

Human development theories, including self-authorship theory, are abundant in the student affairs literature (Evans et al., 2009; Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010), but outside of psycho-social theories, they have typically not included exploration of the relationship between human development and the environment. Of the environmental studies that have been conducted, typically, the dynamics of campus environments were explored (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), including student affairs preparation program environments (Komives, 1998), which identified that linkages exist between student affairs preparation programs and the campus environments. Although it has been articulated that student affairs preparation programs should holistically develop the graduate students within them (Komives, 1998), developmental theorists have given minimal focus to how environments influence the developmental process; instead

they have focused on the internal process of development. Yet, by not examining the role of the environment when exploring the internal process of development a full understanding of the developmental process has not been obtained. Therefore, to fully understand the development of self-authorship for those within a student affairs preparation program it is worthwhile to explore the student affairs preparation program environment and the conditions within it, which promote the process of self-authorship.

Students influence the nature of campus environments just as campus environments generate conditions that affect student learning (Strange & Banning, 2001). The identification that interactions occur between students and campus environments was first articulated in what was labeled a campus ecology model (Aulepp & Delworth, 1976; Banning, 1978; Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Huebner, 1979). Today, the ecology of a campus is better understood and the reciprocal relationship between the environment and the students within it is often acknowledged through the use of learning outcomes (Strange & Banning, 2001). The assumption of the campus ecology model is that students and campuses are mutually shaping forces whether or not they are intended to be, and that students will strive to cope in any environment within which they are placed. There are several ways to explore a campus's ecology, including Pervin's (1968) transactional analysis of personality and environment instrument, which measured self-reported perceptions of individuals and their environments, and Banning and Kaiser's (1974) model, which served as a planning model for the creation of environments that would attain identified values. For this study, Conyne and Clack's (1981) model of the

environment of reference was chosen, which was built upon ecological considerations first articulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Bronfenbrenner's considerations included that individuals interact with their environment in such a way that they are influenced by, and influence, multiple levels of systems.

The environment of reference model was chosen because it allowed for the environmental conditions that surfaced from the participants' stories to be dynamically explored. It also allowed for the bounding of the environment to be that of the student affairs preparation program as articulated by the participants. Thus, the environment of reference model allowed for the understanding of the environment to emerge from the viewpoint of the participants, thereby providing insight into what was present within the environment's design that promoted the process of self-authorship for the participants.

Strange and Banning (2001) offer a campus design that was not selected for the exploration of the environment within this study because of the four goals the design sought to promote: inclusion, safety, involvement and community building. However, the campus design was used to broaden the components of the environment of reference model thereby making the environment of reference model even more inclusive. How the components of the environment of reference model were expanded is noted next.

Environment of Reference Model

The environment of reference model consists of three primary components, three interactive effect components, and a collective impression factor (Coyne & Clack, 1981). The three primary components of an environment of reference are the

physical, social, and institutional. The physical component of an environment refers to the natural and constructed features of the environment comprising such elements as weather and buildings. Using Strange and Banning's (2001) campus design, the definition of the physical environment is furthered to include such components as landscaping, placement of buildings, and lighting. The social factor of the environment of reference model refers to the demographic and personal characteristics of people and their behavior in the environment. Strange and Banning referred to the social factor as the human aggregate and defined it as the collective characteristics of the participants including their relationships. Finally, the institutional component, or as Strange and Banning called it within their campus design model, the organizational component, of the environment includes all policies and procedures that govern, overtly or covertly, the behavior of individuals within the environment.

Each of the primary components of the environment of reference overlaps, creating the interactive effect components, which are: physical-social, social-institutional, and institutional-physical. Each interactive effect component reflects the relationships that exist amongst the primary components within the environment. Finally, the collective impression factor refers to the overall value and attitude individuals have toward the entire environment of reference. The collective impression factor is the dominant evaluation of the environment of reference and is given credibility as the environment of reference is often understood from the viewpoint of the collective impression factor (Moos, 1979). Within Strange and Banning's (2001) campus design, the collective impression factor is referred to as the

constructed component of the environment, and is defined as the collective perceptions of people in a setting. For either the collective impression factor or the constructed component of the environment, the assumption should not be made that all individuals within the environment agree upon it. Rather the collective impression factor is the built-up impression of the overall environment and individuals within the environment hold their own unique perspectives that contribute to the collective impression factor.

Within this study, the environment of reference model was used to define the environment of the student affairs preparation program that promoted the process of self-authorship. It provided structure to the interactions the participants had physically, socially, and institutionally with their environment. A way to explore the environmental conditions for how they connected to the meaning-making structure was to consider them alongside the learning partnerships model.

Learning Partnerships Model

The learning partnerships model [LPM] is a framework that claims to promote the development of self-authorship. It emerged from Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal study. Through the research of Baxter Magolda, it was found that graduate or professional education, post-college employment, and personal and community life experiences were opportunities for the promotion of self-authorship. Each of these contexts revealed what conditions were needed to advance self-authorship, and it was these conditions that Baxter Magolda articulated in the LPM (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Three key assumptions and three key principles are identified in the learning partnerships model. Baxter Magolda (2001) found these three assumptions and three principles to be consistently in use despite differences within the environments. The assumptions provide the challenge for the development toward self-authorship, while the principles offer support for the current way the individual makes meaning. Each assumption and principle also connects to the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions that compose the meaning-making structure, and it is the combination of all of the assumptions and principles that forms the learning partnership.

The first assumption is that “knowledge is complex and socially constructed” (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 41). Individuals faced this assumption by encountering, “multiple interpretations, ambiguity, and through negotiating what to believe with others” (p. 41-42). The second assumption Baxter Magolda found was reflected in the encouragement of bringing oneself into one’s work, relationships, and learning, and that “self is central to knowledge construction” (p. 42). The third assumption is that “authority and expertise were shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers” (p. 42). Although these three assumptions are articulated clearly in the LPM, they were not explicitly stated within the environments Baxter Magolda studied. Rather, they were conditions that were enacted in what individuals were asked to do, and were accompanied by three principles, which connected to an individual’s current way of making meaning of his or her experiences.

The first principle is, “validating the learners’ capacity to know” (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 42). In Baxter Magolda’s (2001) study this was seen in

employers' wanting to hear their employee's opinions, as well as educators respecting the experiences that their students brought to the classroom. The second principle is, "situating the learning in the learners experience" (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 42), and to the participants this principle felt like a sign of respect. The third principle is, "mutually constructing meaning" (p. 43). This principle is about employers or educators connecting their knowledge to that of the participants and together arriving at a more complex understanding and decision. Again, each of the assumptions and principles identified within the LPM creates an environment that promotes the development of self-authorship.

LPM in the work environment and student affairs programs. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) conducted research on the transition of new professionals into the field of student affairs and analyzed what they found against the learning partnerships model. Through an online qualitative survey of 90 new professionals in their first full-time job within the field of student affairs, Renn and Jessup-Anger explored whether or not student affairs and higher education graduate programs prepare graduates for transition into full-time positions within the field of student affairs. The themes that surfaced from the data were: creating a professional identity; navigating a cultural adjustment; maintaining a learning orientation; and seeking sage advice. In each of these areas, evidence did not reflect a widespread embrace of the learning partnerships model within student affairs preparation programs, given the way in which the participants approached their responsibilities as highlighted through the study's themes.

Data from Renn and Jessup-Anger's (2008) study also provided evidence that new professionals are still moving toward self-authorship. For example, in developing a professional identity, many new professionals shared that they did not feel as though their graduate program prepared them for administrative responsibilities such as budgets or supervising, and that not knowing information about these responsibilities left them feeling unprepared. The participants indicated that they did not feel confident in how they were making meaning to reach these responsibilities or that it was acceptable for them to be continually learning. These insights draw attention to if and how the LPM is being used in graduate preparation programs, as well as its presence in the work environment.

Baxter Magolda's (2009) most recent publication, *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Inner Voice*, contains examples of the promotion of self-authorship when the LPM is present within the graduate school environment. However, Baxter Magolda's analysis falls short, as she did not share specific insight into how the LPM was brought into those environments, but rather provided evidence that it was already present. Knowing how to bring the LPM into preparation program environments would not only allow for more widespread adoption of the model, but also has potential to make development toward self-authorship commonplace within student affairs preparation programs.

Other Environmental Conditions

Other research on what is necessary for the advancement of self-authorship within an environment, albeit not necessarily within a student affairs or higher education graduate program or with graduate students, includes Laughlin and

Creamer's (2007) study on the relationship between decision-making and self-authorship within young women. Laughlin and Creamer found that when asked to focus on the process for making decisions students were engaged in a manner supportive of self-authorship development. Laughlin and Creamer's study also found that exposing students to different viewpoints and knowledge, along with allowing students to truly engage with those different viewpoints and knowledge allowed for development toward self-authorship. This is a similar finding to that of Pizzolato (2003, 2004, 2005) who found that through the presence of dissonance within the environment, whether due to discrimination, low privilege, or marginalization, students developed toward self-authorship. Torres (2003) study of Latino and Latina students also found that cognitive dissonance promoted self-authorship. Finally, shaping an environment around intentional learning outcomes has been found to promote the development of self-authorship (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2007; Haynes, 2006; Keeling, 2006).

Transition

Regardless of what research has been conducted identifying environmental conditions that promote self-authorship it is also important to understand transition theory. After all, those attending a student affairs preparation program experience transition within the program environment, and such transitions may contribute to environmental conditions that promote self-authorship. According to Schlossberg et al., (1995), a transition is defined as, "any event, or non-event, that results in changed

relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27), and is defined, and therefore exists, by the individual experiencing it.

In 1995, Schlossberg et al., published the second edition of *Counseling Adults in Transition*. The transition theory Schlossberg et al. articulated was informed from studies that included interviewing NASA men who had lost their jobs (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980), clerical workers on a university campus (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986), and couples that had recently relocated (Schlossberg, 1981). The NASA men were asked through a series of interviews to share their perceptions of the transition they were experiencing resulting from their lost jobs, the supports available to them, as well as the coping styles they adopted (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980). The clerical workers were asked through the use of a structured transition assessment instrument to share their thoughts about a transition they experienced and how they coped (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986). Finally, interviews were the method used to assess the transition experience of couples that had recently relocated (Schlossberg, 1981).

Three types of transitions are a part of Schlossberg et al.’s theory: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. An anticipated transition is a transition that an individual can anticipate, such as entering a new classroom environment when starting a student affairs preparation program. An unanticipated transition is a transition that an individual cannot anticipate, such as disagreement with others in one’s assistantship. Nonevents are those events that are likely to occur, but do not. The type of transition is defined by the meaning the individual attaches to the transition, which is influenced by the context.

An individual experiencing transition does so over a period of time and moves through three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Schlossberg et al. found that four factors influence an individual's ability to move in, through, and out of transition: situation (e.g., timing, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress), self (e.g., personal and demographic characteristics, psychological resources), support (e.g., types, functions, amount), and strategies (e.g., categories, coping modes). It is the resources an individual has available within these areas that help determine an individual's ability to cope. Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition theory falls short when it comes to diversity within the participants used to create the theory, and is challenging to study given the complexity of the model. Nevertheless, it is a useful theory through which to consider the role of the environmental conditions that surfaced in this study given the transition the students experienced.

Why Self-Authorship?

Both Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001) argued that self-authorship is necessary for successful life functioning, both professional and personal, which means that self-authorship is not only necessary for student affairs professionals but for all individuals. Individuals are called to make complex decisions every day, and these decisions can have far-reaching consequences for themselves and others. Additionally, contemporary life requires individuals to possess the ability to face economic complexity, balance multiple roles, interact effectively with a diverse world, and responsibly confront social issues (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Jones, Harper, & Schuh, 2011). Like most fields, student affairs has no shortage of these kinds of complex issues. Exploring four issues helps to illustrate

the need for developing self-authorship for those intending to enter the field of student affairs.

One complex issue facing student affairs professionals is accountability (Association of American Colleges & Universities [AAC&U], 2002, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2007; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Durden, 2007; Jones et al., 2011; Kelderman, 2009; Meszarsos, 2007; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011). Accountability requires student affairs professionals to demonstrate what students learn. Student affairs as a profession has chosen to do this through the use of learning outcomes and assessment. This pressure for proof comes from many sources including the government, the business world, accrediting associations, parents, and even institutions, themselves. As demands from various constituencies increase, student affairs professionals are forced to understand accountability from a variety of perspectives and navigate responsibly the complexities associated with determining what students are learning (Keeling, 2006). These demands mean that no longer can professionals rest simply on the understanding that learning occurs in and outside the classroom. Instead, student affairs professionals are called to articulate learning outcomes for the experiences they offer students. They are also asked to intentionally shape environments so that students reach stated learning outcomes and to assess what and whether students learned within those environments. Each of these steps requires student affairs professionals to understand accountability from multiple perspectives, make responsible decisions using data, and consider what is best for each specific context and those within it. In other words, each of these steps requires that student affairs professionals are self-authored.

Another issue demanding that student affairs professionals be self-authored is an ever-increasing amount of information (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; Jones et al., 2011; Keeling, 2006; Willinsky, Fischman, & Scott Metcalfe, 2011). The advancement of technology has made it easy to share information rapidly and has provided greater access to information (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; Keeling, 2006; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2011). This has resulted in student affairs professionals being asked to manage greater amounts of information, which requires complex thinking, an internal compass to determine what information is important, and the ability to make responsible decisions -- all of which are skills and abilities acquired through the achievement of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2009; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

A third issue facing today's student affairs professionals is that of the increasingly diverse student body attending institutions of higher education (AAC&U, 2002, 2007; American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones et al., 2011; Keeling, 2006; Ryi, 2010; Smith, 2011). Student affairs professionals are often seen as key players in an institution's ability to meet the needs of more diverse students, including advocating for changes in structure, policies, and experiences offered. This issue demands that student affairs professionals reach "intercultural maturity, which in turn requires epistemological [or cognitive], intrapersonal and interpersonal complexity" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269), otherwise known as self-

authorship. Intercultural maturity involves the ability to make ethical decisions when confronted with problems that involved a diversity of perspectives (Deardorff, 2006).

Finally, as institutions consider how to structure learning environments so that graduates are able to meet the demands of the global world, student affairs professionals are being acknowledged as partners with faculty in the promotion of transformative learning (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Transformative learning is defined as “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings and meaning rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). In order to serve effectively as a partner to faculty, student affairs professionals must be able to “collaborate with others to act wisely,” “argue for their perspective,” and “stand up for one’s beliefs over affirmation from others” (Hodge et al., 2009, p. 18). These are all skills and abilities that student affairs professionals can attain upon becoming self-authored.

The issues of accountability, increased information, an increasingly diverse student population, and the focus on transformative learning being a purpose of higher education require that the individuals who address these issues successfully are self-authored, themselves. Graduate school can be an important time for developmental experiences leading toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Quaye, 2007; Rogers et al., 2004). Furthermore, the demands of graduate school in regard to complex thinking and responsible decision-making encourage the development of self-authorship within graduate students. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the process of self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs

preparation program and the environmental conditions that promote self-authorship for graduate students in such a program.

Summary

This chapter examined the graduate school experience for student affairs professionals. Specifically, I addressed a brief history of graduate education, identified the emergence of student affairs preparation programs, and highlighted the amount of attention being paid to competency areas. Cognitive-structural theories and constructive-developmental theory, through the use of self-authorship theory, were also examined in regard to how graduate students make meaning. What is known about environmental conditions that are necessary for the promotion of self-authorship, including how meaning is being made of the graduate school experience in addition to transition theory were explored. Finally, current issues facing student affairs professionals were highlighted as evidence for the need for student affairs professionals to make meaning in complex, self-authored ways.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design. Specifically, the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, research methods, data analysis, and criteria of goodness will be discussed. Finally, researcher subjectivity and ethical considerations are discussed.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of how graduates of a master's-level student affairs preparation program made meaning of their graduate program experiences. Specifically, two primary research questions guided this study:

- (1) What is the process of self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs master's program?
- (2) What are the environmental conditions that promote self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs master's program?

Research Design

The design of this study is described by detailing the epistemology, theoretical framework, and methodology. Each of these elements informed and connected to the other and allowed for the research questions to be addressed through data collection and analysis.

An epistemology is a theory of the nature of knowledge or how individuals know what they know (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Guiding this study was a constructivist epistemology, which puts forward that self is central to knowledge construction (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009). Constructivist epistemology also posits

that multiple realities exist and that the multiple realities are context bound (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). According to a constructivist epistemology, individuals have their own unique way of interacting with the world that is shaped by their personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions, thereby making it appropriate for this study. Individuals' personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions inform their meaning-making structures, which are then used to make sense of, and interact with, the world. A constructivist epistemology was also appropriate for this study because it broadened the contexts that could be explored for the promotion of self-authorship.

Building on the assumptions of a constructivist epistemology was the constructive-developmental (Baxter Magolda, 2007) theoretical framework, which suggests that individuals continually participate in the knowledge construction process through the interpretation of their experiences. Constructive-developmental theory also asserts that the process of knowledge construction involves ways of organizing information, which develop over time, through which meaning is made. The attention that this framework pays to the process of how meaning is made is relevant to this study, which sought to understand the process of self-authorship and the environmental conditions that promoted the process for graduate students who graduated from a student affairs preparation program. By using this framework, how the participants organized information to make meaning, as well as the environmental conditions that promoted such organization surfaced.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry, the methodology followed in this study, allowed the participants to express through narratives the meaning they had made of their student

affairs program experiences. Experiences are what are studied through narrative inquiry because narrative is a key way of understanding and making meaning of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Reissman (1993) indicated, foremost for human beings “to make sense of their experiences is by casting it in narrative form” (p. 4). Narrative inquiry allows for participants to share their experience through story and gets at the wholeness of experience from the way that the participants understand it (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Shank, 2002).

The purpose of narrative inquiry is to understand the lived experience of individuals and how individuals make sense, or meaning, of those experiences (Patton, 2002). Narrative studies often focus on a specific period in the life of participants (Leiblich et al., 1998). In this study, the specific period was the two years of graduate study in a student affairs program. Using narrative inquiry within a constructive-developmental framework allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of the participants who graduated from a student affairs preparation program. Specifically, it allowed for understanding the process of self-authorship through an exploration of how the participants made meaning of their student affairs program experiences. Furthermore, narrative inquiry supported exploration of the participants’ experiences in order to better understand any structures and environmental conditions used to make meaning, while simultaneously allowing for the context of the narrative to be bound by the participants’ student affairs program experiences.

When using narrative inquiry as a methodology, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested four different directions for inquiring into the narrative: inward, outward, backward, and forward. Inward refers to internal conditions such as feelings, beliefs, and values. Outward refers to the environment such as structures, experiences, and conditions. Backward and forward refer to past, present, and future time. These four directions guided this narrative inquiry, permitting the focus to be on the interaction between the person and environment. Such focus allowed for the lived experience of the participants, and the meaning made of those experiences, to be captured. This focus also allowed for an exploration of the process of self-authorship for the participants and any environmental conditions that promoted it.

Sampling Strategy

Along with narrative inquiry, purposeful selection, a “strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” was used (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). One goal of purposeful selection is “achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected” (p. 89). This goal helped to minimize variation so that the narratives could be explored deeply. In order to achieve this goal, the participants chosen to participate in this study attended the same student affairs program, were from the same cohort, and all graduated within the past year. The choice to select participants who graduated allowed for the narratives to reflect the process of self-authorship that occurred during graduate school. The bounding by a single student affairs program and cohort assured a level of commonality among the settings, individuals, and activities. Establishing a certain

level of commonality among the participants allowed for capturing a deeper understanding of the student affairs program experience, as well as an ability to focus the narrative on the topics of concern for this study: the process of self-authorship for the participants and the specific environmental conditions that contribute to that process. Finally, establishing a level of homogeneity among the participants by their graduating from the same preparation program, allowed for the narratives of the participants to be compared and contrasted when analyzing the data.

A second goal of purposeful selection is, “to establish comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). This means that although participants had a program and cohort in common, they also had differences that could be compared across the participants. Intentionally structuring participant selection for differences to exist within the common structures found within student affairs programs, (e.g., differences among practicum experiences and classes), allowed for richer narratives to emerge.

Sampling Criteria for Preparation Program

A criterion for the selection of the student affairs preparation program was that the program must meet the guidelines set forth by the Council for the Advancement [CAS] of Standards (2009). Using a student affairs program that meets the CAS guidelines served the purpose of adding to the potential transferability of the findings to other student affairs preparation programs and graduate experiences. Given that there are many student affairs programs that meet the CAS guidelines, the method for program selection was also determined by the geographical location of the program. Specifically, student affairs programs meeting the CAS standards that were

within a two-hour drive of my home were considered. A two-hour radius was selected based on the belief that students might graduate and obtain a job at a nearby institution thereby increasing the likelihood that the interviews could be conducted in person.

Selection of preparation program. The preparation program studied was listed on the ACPA-College Student Educators International Commission for Professional Preparation graduate program listing (<http://www2.myacpa.org/comm/profprep/directory/>). For a graduate program to become a part of this listing, it must meet the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2009) guidelines for graduate preparation programs. With more than one student affairs program within a two-hour drive that met the CAS standards, the student affairs program with the largest graduating class was selected. This allowed for more possibilities when it came to participant selection. Those that met the selection criteria but with which the researcher had a previously established relationship, such as a student or an employee, were not considered. Although objectivity is not a goal of this research design, if a student affairs program were to have been selected with which I have a preexisting relationship, the credibility of this study would have been limited, as I would have experienced greater challenge ensuring that the narratives heard were those of the participants and not that of the experience I had within the program.

The student affairs preparation program selected for this study is a two-year program at a state institution. To help protect the identity of the participants, the specific institution will not be revealed. However, in order to promote transferability,

it is important to offer a description. The program is located at a research institution in the Midwest with approximately 20,000 students. A cohort model is followed as students move through the program, with typical cohort size being between 30-40 students. The preparation program has been in existence over 40 years. Forty-five credit hours are required for graduation, of which 27 are required courses. An assistantship is also a requirement. Internships and assistantships are offered at the host institution of the student affairs preparation program, as well as nearby two and four year institutions. Finally, the program offers opportunities during the summer for students to experience higher education in other countries.

Sampling Criteria for Participants

The participant selection sampling criteria for this study were: (1) at least one unique experience in graduate school (a different class, practicum, assistantship, or mentor from the other participants); (2) variation of undergraduate major; and (3) variation of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. The first participant selection criterion allowed for a reasonable, yet focused, process for the identification of potential environmental conditions promoting self-authorship. The second criterion acknowledged that there is diversity in regard to the educational background of those attending student affairs programs, and that this difference might influence the process of developing self-authorship while in graduate school. For example, different undergraduate majors might have exposed participants to different opportunities for dissonance thereby creating environments that promoted the development of self-authorship. Finally, the variation of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class was not set as a criterion in order for individuals to

represent these characteristics per se. Rather, the criterion was used because research on the development of self-authorship among undergraduate students has found that race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class have the potential to create dissonance (Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda & Torres, 2004; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Torres, 2003) and thereby promote development toward self-authorship. Those who indicated interest in this study were asked to answer a short set of questions connected to the sampling criteria on an information form (Appendix A).

Selection of the participants. Seven Spring 2010 graduates indicated interest in participating in the study, however only six graduates completed the information form. All six individuals completing the information form met the sampling criteria were selected to become participants, and all were actively engaged in the study. Each of the participants shared his or her own unique experiences within the student affairs preparation program and the meaning that he or she made of those experiences including both challenging and successful experiences. Through the course of the three interviews that were conducted, I developed an intense sense of responsibility to tell their stories with integrity and to convey the complexity of their experiences. Each of the six stories is presented in Chapter Four. Table 1 provides a brief demographic description for each of the participants based on the selection criteria within the information form. Pseudonyms were given to each participant, with the exception of one participant who requested a specific pseudonym.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions

Name	Description
Anne	Pursued completing a master's thesis; history and political science undergraduate major; White; female; heterosexual orientation; middle/upper social class
Kelly	Worked a job outside of her assistantship while in the preparation program; history undergraduate major; White; female; heterosexual orientation; middle social class
Micah	Assistantship within fraternity and sorority life; biochemistry and molecular biology undergraduate major; White; male; heterosexual orientation; middle social class
Brandon	Participated in a study abroad opportunity offered by the preparation program in between his first and second year in the program; computer science undergraduate major; Black; male; heterosexual orientation; middle social class
Ashley	Had a summer experience at an institution other than the one that hosted the preparation program and her assistantship; advertising and public relations undergraduate major; White; female; heterosexual orientation; middle social class
David	Obtained a certificate in organizational change while in the preparation program; biology undergraduate major; White; male; heterosexual orientation; lower/middle social class

Sample Size

There are no rules for sample size when using narrative inquiry; in fact sample sizes are usually small and often unrepresentative (Reissman, 1993). The sample size of this study was large enough for variation, as well as small enough so that I had time to build trusting relationships with each participant. Saturation was not a goal because of the myriad experiences possible for a graduate student to have within a student affairs preparation program, as well as a variety of ways that meaning could be made of those experiences (Patton, 2002). Having only six participants selected for this study allowed for a large amount time to be spent with each participant.

However, only having six participants was a bit surprising given the large number of

graduates who were eligible to participate. One email was sent to all graduates who were eligible to participate in the study, resulting in the seven individuals who initially expressed interest. Perhaps if an additional email had been sent out, more graduates would have expressed interest. Or, more interest might have been expressed if the study were conducted at different time of the year. Data collection was done during the fall, which for those individuals eligible to be participants would have potentially been their first semester as a new professional. If the study had been conducted during the summer, prior to any of the potential participants starting new jobs, or even during the spring semester after the potential participants had a chance to adjust to being new professionals, more potential participants might have expressed interest. At the conclusion of the study, all those participating received a \$50 Target gift card to thank them for their contribution.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews are widely used for data collection in narrative research because through interviews much of the narrative text is created (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Baxter Magolda (2004) described interviews themselves as a context through which meaning is made. Specifically, three reflective responsive interviews were used in order to help draw out the participants' narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). Reflective responsive interviews occur when "the researcher is responding to and then asking further questions about what he or she hears from the interviewees rather than relying on predetermined questions" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii).

The particular reflective responsive interview format used was piloted on two Spring 2010 graduates of a student affairs preparation program other than the one

studied, and is based on the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education Interview [Wabash Interview] (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The Wabash Interview is one of two interview strategies for assessing self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The Wabash Interview was appropriate for guiding the interview for this study because it was designed specifically to assess self-authorship in those with whom the researcher does not have a long standing relationship and it allows participants to reflect on their views about knowledge, self, and social relations. The key to the Wabash Interview is “encouraging students to make sense of their experience rather than the educator making sense of it for them” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 9). Using the Wabash Interview as a foundation for the interviews within this study allowed for insight into how the respondents’ views about knowledge, themselves, and their social relations affected their participation in their graduate school experiences.

There are four phases to the Wabash Interview (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The first phase is, “getting acquainted and building rapport” (p. 9). The key to this phase is to ask the participants questions that allow them to tell the researcher about themselves in such a way that the participants are comfortable. The second phase is, “encouraging reflection about important experiences” (p. 9), and is moved into once there is a comfortable level of conversation. The purpose of this phase is to help participants reflect in a meaningful way about their experiences. During this phase it was important to get at the “why” behind the meaningfulness of the experience and not just the “what” of the experience. The third phase is, “encouraging interpretations of these reflections” (p. 10). Once the interview

conversation begins to wind down, it is helpful to have the participants reflect on the experiences they have shared and what those experiences have meant to them.

Finally, the fourth phase of the Wabash Interview is, “concluding thoughts” (p. 10). During this final phase it is important that what the participants share is affirmed and that they are encouraged to keep track of any reflections they have and bring them to the next interview.

The four phases of the Wabash Interview were used to structure the interview protocol. Specific interview questions for each of the three interviews are found in Appendix B. The interview questions for the first interview connect to phase one of the Wabash Interview, which is primarily focused on building rapport with the participants. For example, participants were asked to share a bit about themselves and why they chose to get a master’s degree in student affairs. The interview questions for the second and third interviews connect in the same way to the Wabash Interview phase two and three respectively. Phase four of the Wabash Interview occurred at the conclusion of all of the interviews by encouraging participants to bring to the next interview any reflections they might have had, as well as by sending to them the transcript of the interview and allowing them to validate what they had shared thereby affirming that they were heard.

Timeline

Data collection for this study lasted five months. Each interview was about 60 minutes and was electronically recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews took place at mutually convenient times and locations. The selection of the preparation program was within a two-hour drive of where I lived with the

thought that those who had recently graduated obtained positions near the institution hosting the preparation program. Although there might have been graduates who obtained such jobs, the majority of those who indicated interest in this study did not, thereby limiting the amount of face-to-face interviews that could be conducted. Specifically, all but one participant lived over 7 hours away. Still, accommodations were made to conduct as many interviews in person as possible, which resulted in two face-to-face interviews. For those interviews that were not conducted in person, phone interviews were conducted. A total of 16 phone interviews were conducted. All of the participants' first interviews were conducted by phone. The second and third interviews were conducted in person for one of the participants, while the remaining participants engaged in phone interviews.

Data Analysis

A variety of approaches exist to analyze narrative data. Some strategies focus on analyzing the whole narrative, others on discrete parts, while still others combine one or more of these strategies (Lieblich et al., 1998). Specifically, Lieblich et al. (1998) identified four approaches to the analysis of narrative data. The first approach is the categorical-form and provides for an analysis of specific linguistic characteristics of the narratives collected. The second approach, holistic-form analysis, allows for the researcher to analyze the whole story by exploring how it is structured. The third approach, holistic-content analysis, allows for analysis of the complete content of the story. Finally, the fourth approach is categorical-content analysis. Categorical-content analysis uses the constant comparative method, analyzing the narrative's content in terms of themes and categories (Lieblich et al.,

1998). The categorical-content analysis approach of data analysis for narrative inquiry is what was used for this study. This approach to narrative inquiry was well suited for this study because it allowed the narrative data collected to be analyzed in parts related to the environmental conditions that promoted self-authorship for the participants, as well as the process of self-authorship itself.

Content analysis in the content-categorical approach has four steps that together compose the constant comparative method. Each of these steps was followed separately for each participant's narrative, and, although each step is presented here as separate and distinct, they actually occur continually for each individual participant. Step one involves determining sections of the texts that are relevant to the research questions. For this study, that meant determining sections of the text that relate to the process of self-authorship for the participants as well as the environmental conditions that promoted self-authorship. In this stage, relevant sections of the data are open-coded, or "marked and assembled to form a new file or subtext" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 112). Open-coding involves reviewing each line of the transcript and focusing on the words of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This step involved my reading the transcripts and making notes of general content areas, as well as thoughts and impressions that arose.

The next step identified categories that cut across this newly formed subtext. This was accomplished by reading the subtext as openly as possible in order to define the major content categories that emerge from the reading (Lieblich et al., 1998). The categories that emerged I labeled: external; struggle; confidence; and voice peeking through.

The third review of the transcripts involved sorting the subtext from step one into the categories identified in step two (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As each participant's narrative was sorted into categories, the categories become more refined and the data were read and reread for clarification and meaning (Lieblich et al., 1998). This step consisted of cutting passages from printed copies of each participant's three interviews and taping them into the categories identified in the second step that I had posted on two walls. During this process I continually went back through the text to ensure that the categories were grounded in the data. Particular areas of responses that were similar were identified as thematic, and noted, when at least three of the participants offered similar responses. Additional themes that did not relate specifically to the research questions were also identified and marked when three or more participants discussed them. All of the themes that emerged are presented in the findings within Chapter Four.

The final step was "drawing conclusions from the results" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 114) related to the research questions for this study. The finished product was multiple narratives, in which the story of the meaning the participants made of their experiences in a student affairs preparation program was told. My own interpretation and explanation of the narratives, grounded in the data, is also offered in the final product, as well as in the discussion within Chapter Five.

Criteria of Goodness

According to Agostinho (2004), assessing the quality of qualitative research depends on three factors, which together compose the criteria of goodness. The first factor is "the appropriateness of the research design for the research problem" (p. 8).

The constructivist epistemology allows for the process and structures of self-authorship as well as any environmental conditions that promote it to surface. The narrative inquiry methodology, in conjunction with the constructivist epistemology and the constructive-developmental theoretical framework, allowed for the data collected to be determined by the participants and how they made meaning of their experiences. Since the study was exploratory, the themes identified through the data analysis process emerged from the interviews and were not conclusive in nature. This, in turn, allowed for the study results to be based on the findings that emerged from the interviews, which are not conclusive in nature.

The second criterion is the usefulness of the study. This study is useful for several reasons. First, it provides additional empirical evidence for self-authorship theory. Second, it focuses on the process of self-authorship for graduate students within student affairs preparation programs, rather than simply identifying additional knowledge or competency areas that should be taught. Finally, this study examines environmental conditions that may promote self-authorship in student affairs graduate preparation programs. This allows others to potentially transfer the environmental conditions to their student affairs programs, as well as contributes to the discussion of what is needed for successful preparation of student affairs professionals.

The third criterion for establishing goodness is assessing the process through which the study was conducted. With qualitative research, specifically research that is grounded in constructivism and a constructive-developmental theoretical framework, the benchmarks of rigor are referred to as the criteria of trustworthiness, and are composed of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability

(Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Each of these serves as a standard of quality and is addressed below.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the fit between what the participants shared and how the researcher understands what has been shared (Schwandt, 2001). Credibility was brought to this study through the process of member checking, the relationship between researcher and participants, and peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Member checking is when the researcher restates, summarizes, and paraphrases the information received from the participants to make sure that what the researcher heard and recorded is what the participants meant (Kuzel & Like, 1991). Guba and Lincoln (1989) considered member checking to be “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking entails returning to those interviewed to obtain either more information or their input as to how their narrative is being understood because the “teller has, if not the final word, at least the first word on which interpretation depends” (Reissman, 1993, p. 50). Sharing with the participants their transcripts and asking them to make corrections served as member checking for this study. Furthermore, at each interview, I began by sharing with participants what was heard and understood to be the experience of participants during the previous interview. I also reflected back to each participant what I heard the participant say as the interview was being conducted. Finally, each participant also had the opportunity to clarify and comment on the narrative that was written reflecting his or her experience as a part of the findings of the study.

In regard to the relationships with the participants, sufficient time must be put in to establish trust and achieve the purpose of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The relationships were established over time a five-month period, as each participant was interviewed three times, and given the opportunity to edit their own narratives. This consistent contact aided in establishing a trusting relationship. Attempts were made to conduct all interviews in person, and when they could not be conducted in person, arrangements were made for phone interviews. Although phone interviews did not allow me the opportunity to visually evaluate nonverbal behavior upon which I could follow up, they did seem to contribute to the participants' feeling comfortable thereby enabling them to share with me what some might consider to be sensitive information. Participants were also provided with my personal contact information, so that they could share their thoughts and raise questions about the study at any time. Only one participant followed up outside of the scheduled interview time to clarify some of what was shared during the third interview, while another inquired as to when the study would be complete.

Finally, by engaging in peer debriefing, credibility was brought to the study. Peer debriefing is "the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 308). Two peer debriefers were used during the data collection and data analysis phase of this study. One was, at the time, a doctoral student who had both training and experience with qualitative research methods. The other was a current professional with a PhD who was familiar with the literature on self-

authorship theory. Some of the specific characteristics of the peer debriefers selected for this study are characteristics not found within myself. Specifically, one peer debriefer was a male, and one was a person of color. Intentionally selecting such peer debriefers who were different served to strengthen the credibility of the study (Spillet, 2003). Each of the peer debriefers was selected because of their likelihood to ask questions and identify assumptions that I might take for granted, and each did just that. For example, because this study was designed using constructive-developmental theory, and specifically self-authorship theory, as the theoretical framework I sometimes struggled making sure that the findings were grounded in the stories that the participants shared rather than self-authorship theory. Sometimes my peer debriefers would ask me from where in the data my determinations emerged, or would share with me that they heard the participants sharing something else causing me to reflect on my own thoughts and revisit the stories. Other times the participants would serve as sounding boards, a place where I could go and share what I wanted to say to the participants during the interview, but did not. For example, because the participants shared personal stories that sometimes contained sensitive information I felt a strong pull to reciprocate and share with them my own personal stories. However, the purpose of the study was not to collect my own stories of my own experiences within preparation programs. Being able to turn to my peer debriefers and share my experiences was helpful in that it provided me a chance to release my thoughts in a manner that did not result in the participants hearing them.

Transferability. Transferability allows readers to determine if the results apply to their unique circumstances (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Thick, rich description

of the narrative is used to achieve transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This thick, rich description is established through detailed narrative in which readers are able to determine the context of the narrative and whether the results are then transferable to other particular situations. I did my best to provide such rich narrative in Chapter Four. Through the use of an interview protocol based on the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education Guide, data was gathered broadly and followed up by more specific probing questions, which encouraged the participants to reflect upon their responses leading to deep description of the narratives collected.

Dependability. Dependability is achieved by demonstrating that the process for conducting the research is logical, traceable, and documented (Schwandt, 2001). Peer debriefing contributes to dependability, as does reflexivity, the process of researcher reflection on the process and his or her influence on the data and analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Reflexivity was achieved through field notes written before, during, and immediately following each interview. These notes allowed for personal reflection as to how I am influencing the narratives, as well as the assumptions that I brought to the process. Field notes also serve as an audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), or documentation of the entire process of the study. An audit trail helps to achieve dependability by allowing others to retrace the research steps taken in conducting the study. For this study, the audit trail included the field notes, summaries of the peer debriefings, the coding process, and an articulation of how inferences can be tracked back to the data.

Confirmability. Confirmability is the extent to which the participants, not the researcher's personal interests, shape the findings of the study (Guba & Lincoln,

1989). Like dependability, confirmability is demonstrated through a documented research process. Field notes, and the preparations necessary for an audit trail, as well as member checking all contributed to establishing confirmability in this study.

Researcher Subjectivity

With respect to the constructivist epistemology and both the criteria of goodness and trustworthiness I sought to achieve, it is important that I share the subjectivity that I bring to this study as the researcher. After all, the constructivist epistemology acknowledges that meaning is made through experience, and each of the participants experienced interaction with me during the interviews.

I received my master's degree from a student affairs program that was a CAS compliant program, and it is my belief that I developed toward self-authorship while in that program. I am also now able to reflect back on ways in which the program was being intentionally structured to promote the development of self-authorship. Furthermore, I am a doctoral candidate in another student affairs program containing a master's program that is CAS compliant, within which I have taught. The knowledge I have gained, as well as the observations I made, within this program contribute to my belief that it is necessary for student affairs professionals to achieve self-authorship to successfully meet the demands of the profession. Finally, I have studied under and with several of the researchers whose studies serve as the foundation for this research, which has allowed me to question and reflect upon each study from a more intimate perspective. Each of these experiences influences who I am, as well as the perspective I brought to this study by shaping my interest in graduate preparation. Specifically, my own experience allowed me to participate

within two different CAS compliant student affairs preparation programs observing and making meaning of my experiences within it.

My experiences within the preparation programs, including those with faculty who have researched self-authorship, contributes to my understanding of self-authorship theory, and allowed me to witness research conducted through the constructivist paradigm. These experiences influenced the probing questions I asked participants, data analysis, and study design. Specifically, they led me to structure this study using a constructive-developmental framework, as the assumptions of constructive-developmental theory are those in which I believe. Furthermore, my experiences served as the foundation of my belief, and an assumption of this study, that individuals are on a continuum leading to the development of self-authorship and that student affairs graduate preparation programs can promote the advancement of an individual on that course. Throughout the course of this study, it was continually my responsibility to be aware of this assumption regarding self-authorship theory and the preparation program environment. Field notes, peer debriefing, providing an audit trail, and through the process of member checking, I strove to be continually mindful of how my beliefs in self-authorship theory could have influenced my participants' narratives.

When the data analysis and final writing of the research findings did occur, I took on a more authoritative voice, meaning that the participants narratives, as well as my own interpretation and explanation of the narratives, were offered (Chase, 2005). Conducting the data analysis and the final writing of the research required that I make decisions about what I heard was the meaning the participants made, and although

member checking helped bring credibility to the participants' narratives, the theoretical discussion of the findings were not member checked. Rather, they are my own understandings of how the findings connect or move away from various theories and models. Thus, I try not to present the discussion conclusively, as it is not, but rather offer it as the start to a conversation regarding how graduate students within preparation programs make meaning, and the environmental conditions that promote such a process.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, ethical issues were taken into consideration. IRB approval was obtained and participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and all data was organized and filed in a secure location. At no time were the faculty within the student affairs program of which the participants are alumni, or any others, privy to the raw data collected or the identification of the participants. Furthermore, procedures for ensuring confidentiality and the voluntary nature of this study were articulated clearly in the Statement of Informed Consent that each participant signed.

Even though all names and experiences were altered in a manner that allows for their anonymity, faculty members and fellow cohort members in the program could still identify the participants based on what the participants shared. The faculty will have graded assignments, witnessed presentations, and interacted with the participants in ways that could lead them to identify the participants. Other cohort members have worked with participants on group projects, observed presentations, and interacted in ways that could lead them to identify the participants. This

challenge was discussed with each of the participants in depth at the initial meeting and throughout the study as needed. Each participant was given the opportunity to review what was written about him or her to ensure that he or she is comfortable with how he or she is portrayed. Finally, I did my best to make sure that each participant was treated with utmost respect, and that each shared only what he or she was comfortable disclosing by checking in and allowing each to review his or her own narratives.

Summary

This chapter addressed the research design of this study. It opened with an overview of the constructivist epistemology and then moved into the constructive-developmental theoretical framework. Next the narrative inquiry methodology was explained, followed by a description of the self-authorship interview research method that was used. After that, the data analysis from the categorical-content approach, as well as the criteria of goodness is discussed. Finally, I shared my personal subjectivity, as it impacted the study, and concluded by addressing the ethical issues related to conducting this study.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the stories of the self-authorship process for six recent master's-level graduates of a student affairs preparation program. The stories also identify environmental conditions that promote the process of self-authorship. Through the depiction of the main content from their stories, each of the participants' stories is shared concerning his or her student affairs preparation program experiences. The environmental conditions promoting the process of self-authorship identified in the stories are those that surfaced across the six narratives.

Process of Self-Authorship Narratives

The narratives shared are not simply a summary of the interviews collected, but also include my analysis of the interviews. The six narratives shared are intended to describe both the experiences identified by each participant as meaningful to their student affairs preparation program experience, as well as how each participant made meaning of those experiences. I identify in each narrative only the characteristics of the process used to make meaning that the participant identified to show how each participant made meaning of their experiences in a student affairs preparation program. Guiding each participants' narrative are the themes that emerged from each of the three participant interviews. These themes usually included environmental conditions the participant noted as he or she made meaning of his or her experiences. The themes and the organization of each narrative differ for each of the participants.

The narratives are concentrated both on the content of the participants' descriptions of the experiences they had while in a student affairs preparation program, as well as how they made meaning of their experiences. By focusing the

narratives in this manner it revealed the relationship that existed between the meaning that was made of an experience and the experiences shared in each narrative. A brief analysis of the connections between each of the participants' narratives and process for making meaning are offered once each of the narratives is shared.

Variation in the length of the narratives does not reflect differences among the participants' engagement or value of the narratives. Regardless of the amount of time spent interviewing it was not feasible to represent adequately the depth of the participants' process of self-authorship in each of the narratives. In an attempt to reflect as much richness as possible, the narratives include large quotations from the participants' interview transcripts. With permission from each of the participants, grammar was corrected if doing so did not change the meaning of what was shared, and words such as "um" and "uh" were omitted. The order in which the narratives are presented represents developmental progress toward self-authorship in order to highlight the movement toward self-authorship that the participants made. There is no judgment attached to differences within the complexity that the participants used to make meaning of their student affairs preparation program experiences. The participants all successfully graduated from the student affairs preparation program studied and obtained positions as new professionals within student affairs, which are accomplishments of which to be proud.

Anne

The process Anne used when entering the preparation program to make decisions and meaning was that of seeking external support for her own personal

interests. Anne brought this way of making meaning with her from her undergraduate institution where she was an out-of-state student. During her junior year she was unsure about what she wanted to do with her degree, so she went to the career center. At the career center, Anne took career assessment instruments. The results indicated she should consider the counseling field:

My degree is in political science and history and my junior year I was having a little trouble trying to figure out how to translate my interests through my degree program into a career so I went to the [name of undergraduate institution] career services and they assisted me in filling me up with Myers-Briggs Type indicators testing and the Strong Interest Inventory. When I went through that process it came back strong for going into counseling and I kind of worked with a counselor who...you know...talking about my Myers-Briggs which is an ENFP and just saying that would be a strong connection for going into a counseling profession. And I knew myself fairly well, and I knew that counseling would definitely be an interest of mine, but I didn't think that maybe I had the patience or the life experience to pursue maybe mental health counseling or...psychological counseling.

Anne's interest in counseling being validated externally through the career assessment tools she took led her to consider counseling as a profession. Although Anne did not think she had enough "patience" to become a "health counselor," Anne did find herself appreciating the counseling she was receiving from the student affairs professional in the career center:

I was interested, during our meeting, just about the woman who was working with me and how helpful she had been, so I just...in the middle of our appointment, I just said, can you tell me a little bit about what you do and how you got here? She explained the student affairs kind of program and how you need to get a master's degree in higher education administration or student affairs or whatnot to be able to be a career counselor.

The meeting Anne had with the career counselor was when Anne first learned of student affairs preparation programs. Anne's interest became stronger when she learned that the career counselor she was speaking to had attended [name of student affairs preparation program] because:

As a child I had actually lived in [name of city and state], so I was kind of familiar with the area so I was like ok great! So, I just kind of started exploring programs in the profession and applied to four or five schools and that is how I got into student affairs basically.

Anne's connection of her personal experience of having lived in a town similar to the one the career counselor lived in when the career counselor was attending graduate school seemed to provide some level of comfort to Anne's pursuit of a student affairs career path. Again, the external connection to an interest of Anne's appeared to be a part of the process Anne used to make decisions, including determining the preparation program she would attend.

During her senior year Anne applied to five student affairs preparation programs. She ended up with three offers and felt pressure to take one of them prior to what she understood to be the deadline for candidates to make assistantship and

program decisions, which she determined to be unethical behavior. In the end, Anne selected the program that she felt was the “best fit”:

I actually received some pressure to make a decision before I was ready, and after checking with some of the standards for the process I felt that the person I was working with at [name of student affairs preparation program] was technically on the verge of being unethical, so I actually ended up making my decision about [name of student affairs preparation program] because I felt it was the best fit. I knew from the beginning the way that the faculty had spoke saying that there were timelines and that we had the right in taking our time in making a decision and I really appreciated that.

Anne indicated that she felt pressure to make a decision and justified her feelings of pressure by blaming them on a standards violation. Anne learned about what she believed were standards that all preparation programs were to follow, and that the standards articulated a universal date for making assistantship offers. Yet, the advice Anne received regarding the standards made it so that by Anne receiving a call from another school, it would be a standards violation:

So, [name of student affairs preparation program] actually called me and offered me my assistantship position in their career office while I was at [name of student affairs preparation program], so I was in the middle of doing assistantship interviews and she called and I answered the phone and I spoke with her. She told me that there were two positions available in the office and that the first one had been accepted immediately and I was their first choice for the other position. I said that I’m actually out of town, because it was

during my spring break. I didn't say that I was at another school. I just said that I needed some time and she put the timeline as a week to two weeks, and I knew based on going to [name of student affairs preparation program] that, I'm not saying illegally, but that the higher education affairs... student affairs programs across the country had made this agreement that April 15th would be the decision. When I went to [name of student affairs preparation program], one of the faculty members there had said that we just want to make you aware that if someone at [name of student affairs preparation program] or any other school puts pressure on you this is the timeline.

One reason Anne felt pressure, by being offered an assistantship before what she understood to be an agreed upon deadline, was because the offer was made prior to her boyfriend's making a decision regarding what he would be doing post-graduation. Anne had a strong interest in staying geographically close to her boyfriend, and the offer she received did not support her interest. Anne also felt a stronger connection at the institution she ended up attending:

I was in a long distance relationship at the time with my boyfriend, who's still my current boyfriend, who was making a decision on attending law school. [Name of student affairs preparation program] was kind of far away from where he was looking, and so I was really counting on that April 15th deadline in case he hadn't made a decision yet. We were both trying to coordinate, and it ended up working out really well. He ended up going to [name of school] even though he hates the institution as a sports institution because he went to [name of institution]. So I just felt a lot of pressure because I knew that she

had given me a timeline that wasn't technically fair, and I was also dealing with making some personal decisions, as well as making a decision on a program that I felt was the best fit. Essentially I was waiting to hear from [name of student affairs preparation program] because I felt the strongest connection there.

When Anne was asked to share more about the connection she felt, Anne shared that she was, "really impressed by the faculty's presence during our interview sessions." Specifically, she was impressed that the faculty members were interested in the students and took time to meet with them. This faculty behavior was new to Anne, and it motivated her to reciprocate the feeling and become interested in them:

At the Sunday afternoon program the entire faculty were there introducing themselves, sitting down at tables with the students, and getting to know the perspective students.... getting to know them better and talking about their specialties. Coming from such a large institution, with [name of undergraduate institution], I was just so impressed that the faculty members had taken the time to be a part of the process, especially during the weekend and I was definitely interested in some of the things specific faculty members were working on.

Anne also felt a connection with the current students, as the interview days she attended were set up so that a current student hosted each potential student. As it turned out for Anne, she ended up working together in the same assistantship as her host:

I also just really connected with some of the current first-year students there. They were very accommodating. The program is set up so that you are hosted by a student, and so that was a really great experience to kind of have professional time with current students and opportunities to make those social connections and actually the individual that I stayed with, we ended up working together in our assistantship, she was a second-year and I was a first-year.

Finally, Anne also indicated that she felt a connection during the assistantship interviews with the individual who would become her assistantship supervisor. Anne ended up accepting an academic advising assistantship:

The assistantship that I ended up getting I felt that I ended up making a strong connection with that supervisor during my two interviews there. So, I felt really good about the academic component of the program, as well as the assistantship component when I received the offer and knew what office would be working on had I accepted at [name of student affairs preparation program].

So for Anne, the decision to go into the program was based on her feeling a sense of “connection” to her thoughts and interests with those she felt were knowledgeable. This connection did not extend to her cohort members, as Anne did not mention them.

Wanting to Pursue Personal Interests

The process Anne entered the program using to make decisions and meaning of her experiences involved her finding external support for her own personal interests, a process that was not supported through the preparation program

coursework, which led Anne to experience frustration. Anne indicated that she felt “really good about the academic component” prior to entering the program, yet once in it, Anne struggled. Anne stated that in the beginning she had to come to realize that all of what she was going to learn was going to be, “narrowly tailored to prepare you to go into this profession.” This struggle of a narrow focus was central to Anne’s experience in the preparation program, and was frustrating when it did not easily allow her to pursue her interests. Anne described her coursework as non-academic and compared it to her undergraduate coursework, which she labeled as academic, intellectual, or liberal arts:

Within my undergraduate work I thought that there was a lot...that there was more opportunity for kind of creativity and I don’t want to say intellectual and say that my work at [name of student affairs preparation program] wasn’t academic or intellectual, but I felt I was asked a lot more in my undergraduate degree program to kind of use my intuition and create themes and connect ideas. I actually missed that a lot and that is why I actually pursued completing a master’s thesis even though it is not a requirement of [name of student affairs preparation program] program.

Anne felt that her undergraduate program allowed her to be more creative and follow her own interests when it came to her coursework and she preferred it, so she decided to pursue writing a thesis hoping that it would allow her a similar opportunity. Although Anne did not think that her master’s program was very academic, she was reluctant to say so and had difficulty adjusting to the new way she was being asked to write:

I didn't have a lot of choices with what I was taking, was more asking me to...we had a lot of informational interviews. We had to do like a site team visit where we visited another institution and kind of did a presentation on it. I just felt that there were less opportunities to kind of have...do some creative work and be academic. I don't know. I'm trying to say that in a way that's not putting down the program because you know, reflecting upon it now that I'm in my first career I realize the point...writing some of the papers that we had to write. We did a faculty interview where I had to interview a member of the faculty at the institution and try and get a realistic understanding of the relationship between student affairs practitioners and faculty at an institution. I definitely understood the value of that at the time, but I got a C on the paper because I just didn't know how to type up a paper like that where you don't have a thesis statement and connected various themes, so I struggled.

Despite Anne's indicating that she understood the value of the assignment to conduct a faculty interview, it is clear that she struggled with actually understanding the purpose of the assignment. It seemed as if, to Anne, the approach to academics in the master's program, where she was continually being asked to explore the college environment from different perspectives, was not intellectual and therefore, to her, less academic:

Even some of the more creative pieces that we wrote, whether it be, kind of, through environments class and designing a college campus that met a certain need or a...looking at, I'm trying to think of some other projects that I did. One course you were required to pick three academic institutions within a

certain regional or organizational or institutional type and do a presentation on that. It wasn't necessarily looking for themes...it was more a report back to the group on your findings. So...and a lot of that paperwork I didn't really feel that I was getting that experience to kind of again look at a variety of sources, make some assumptions based on the materials, and again have kind of an original thesis statement.

Anne experienced this struggle with the assignments from the outset of her time in the preparation program. Anne would have preferred to follow her own interests, instead of being asked to examine another perspective and what it might mean for student affairs practice, which was a way of thinking of which Anne could not see the point. After the first semester, one way that Anne found to support her following her own interests was by choosing to pursue a master's thesis:

Once I had completed my first semester, I had kind of alluded to the fact that I had struggled, I really realized how much I had missed kind of the academic writing I had done in my history degree program and that is when I really decided that it was something that I was going fully commit to.

Pursuing a master's thesis was not easy for Anne. She experienced what she felt was resistance from the faculty due to minimal precedence and unclear program requirements. However, a master's thesis allowed Anne to do something she considered academic and that she was interested in, providing Anne with a level of support in the midst of the challenges she was experiencing through her other coursework:

It was an opportunity that was available, but it was not necessarily one that was very popular. To be honest, I did struggle a little bit to get support. It wasn't that faculty members weren't supportive in providing that additional work. It was just...I think there had been a history of students saying they wanted to pursue this and they sat down and spent time with faculty and then they were not able to be successful in completing it, so I did get a lot of push when I was initially talking about my ideas to really demonstrate that I was committed to the process.

Although Anne chose to pursue a master's thesis, allowing her to pursue her own academic interests, she struggled with her interest in pursuing "academic" student affairs work. Anne felt pressure from both the faculty and the second year students in the preparation program to obtain a variety of experiences, but could not see how she could obtain a variety of experiences while still pursuing her interest in "academic" student affairs work. After determining for herself that her interest would not allow her to acquire a variety of experiences, Anne went to a faculty member to discuss the situation:

I remember about two months into the program I went to one of my faculty members and said I completely value the need to be well-rounded and have various life experiences to be able to understand why you are where you are and why it is a good fit for you, but I just have to say that I know to be successful in student affairs I need to be working with students within an academic setting, and the faculty member really helped me kind of change my perspective and saying [Anne] that is completely fine if that is how you want

to spend your time here, then that is what you need to do, you know yourself here more than anyone else does. But what I challenge you to do is find as many unique experiences as possible within that realm.

The faculty member Anne turned to helped Anne find a way to pursue her interest in experiences within academic settings and still have a variety of experiences while in the preparation program.

Personal Interests vs. Self-reflection

Outside of working on her master's thesis, Anne was being asked to participate in self-reflection in the classroom. Self-reflection was not something Anne considered to be academic, and not something Anne was used to being asked to do from her undergraduate experience:

I guess that was another kind of surprise in that the program in general was just...there were a lot of opportunities and requirements to write reflection pieces and they were not academic...it was not academic...I mean it was academic work, but I was literally writing journals essentially. In [name of student affairs preparation program] program, we met with our advisor once a month, so the 5-6 students that were assigned to each faculty member met once a month and every meeting we had a reflection piece that was due, basically...how are you doing, how are things going? In the capstone course, which is the last semester of the graduate program, all of the work for that is essentially a reflection on your experience at the institution and how you will take what you've done and bring it to the work of student affairs. The faculty member that I had for that course was very well known in the higher

education community for being someone who values the reflective process, so I think even more so I was experiencing opportunities to participate in those reflections with journaling, which is not necessarily my personality. I think the reason I was so surprised by it because it was one of the things that I struggled with the most...kind of writing down my feelings and reaching out to someone and saying you know this is what I'm struggling with right now. The idea that a faculty member would care about that, or want to talk about it was really counterintuitive to my undergraduate experience.

Anne did not understand why a faculty member would care about her feelings or her struggles. It was easier for Anne to write reflections in relation to academic material rather than just her own thoughts. Anne also questioned how her reflections would be graded and focused on what the faculty member wanted in order to receive a high grade:

I just wasn't used to writing from a personal perspective. I didn't really know how exactly that is graded. What are you looking for? What do you need from me in terms of writing from myself? It was just a little awkward. And most of those pieces were just something that was turned in, did you do this yes/no? Do I need to be concerned about your well-being? Or how are you doing in the program and do I need to check in with you and make sure that things are going well? Which is definitely considerate and I appreciated it, but it was a difficult task for me to complete because it just had been so long since I had ever been asked to produce that kind of writing. There were definitely opportunities for reflection within the academic setting where we

did have to write again...personal reflections but more related to the material that we were working on, but more related to our personal perspectives and were we taking a point of view on the material, which was definitely a little bit more easy. It was easier for me to do because again it was putting it in academic components.

The process Anne followed to make meaning included her seeking external support for her interests; self-reflection challenged that process by requiring her to reflect on her interests, which was not something that Anne was used to doing. Despite Anne's judgment of reflection not being academic, she began to participate in the reflection process when it came to her relationships with others. During Anne's time in the program, Anne experienced much more "overt expressions of faith" from a close friend than what she was used to. This process of reflecting on her own experience in contrast to her friend's allowed her to question whether she was truly as open as she thought she was. Anne got to a place where she questioned her own behavior based on what her friend had shared with her:

You know I really realized that you know...all right if I am going to feel this way about certain religions expressing their faith then I need to get that same level of respect to Christianity because I was just... I was experiencing not just Christianity in general. I mean, I come from a Christian household, but because of some of the regional places people came from, I was just experiencing a different type of Christianity. Or even a different denomination, but more just the way that it was expressed. I have a friend, my closest friend in the program was actually raised...I really...she describes

the experience as very evangelical Christian and she admits kind of moving away from that experience as well. She told me one time I would never say to someone in our program, I will pray for you, if they were telling me about a problem they have. I said yeah, I would feel kind of...I would appreciate it because I know that is important to you, but I would feel kind of uncomfortable. I would never say that, but if I were at home then I would say that and it would be normal. It was interesting to hear how she had transitioned into her transition into [name of institution], which made me laugh because of my perception of it. Again, it made me look at me saying that I'm this really open person, who is accepting to all of these different things and am I really? Or am I just open to people being open?

Anne's reflection on the differences between her and her close peer friend allowed Anne to consider if the way that she saw herself was really who she was to others. Interactions between Anne and others around her, including her friend, also seemed to cause Anne to begin to question and see herself from others' perspectives.

For example, Anne began the program confident that she knew how college students should be, and when they chose a different path she was frustrated. She struggled to connect with students who were themselves experiencing issues for whatever reason, making it so the undergraduate program to which they were enrolled was not of interest to them:

It [the college degree programs] does have a liberal arts requirement and component to the program and I struggled working with students who had

absolutely no interest in those components and were frustrated and presented that to me. I had a really hard time connecting with those students.

Anne also struggled connecting to students who had not gone out-of-state to school like she had:

At one point [while teaching a class] I asked how many of you are friends or know someone who is at [name of institution] from another state and my class had one person from another state and so that was just difficult for me.

At first, when it did not make sense as to why she was not connecting with the students, Anne determined that the students were not connecting to her because of the institution she attended as an undergraduate student:

I had a really hard time with students trusting me because I went to [name of institution]. I don't know if it was the [name of institution] thing or it was just perceptions in the state about what [name of institution] was as an institution. I had my diploma up and I didn't have any other [name of institution] paraphernalia up in my office, but I had lots of students make comments about that.

Anne also perceived the students as less driven and less committed to learning for the sake of learning before realizing that the students were not like her. Rather, the students were more focused on the end result of obtaining a college degree. This belief made it hard for Anne to become comfortable with students who had different goals than those she had when she was in college, and allowed her to begin seeing her own experiences through the eyes of others:

Clearly I just...my experience at [name of undergraduate institution] and what my perception of what a collegiate experience is and who a college student is was very, very specific. I had never had an opportunity to see other people's college experiences and realized that I had been very privileged. I had been at an institution with people that only were highly motivated, but had the resources to be motivated and so being at the institution I was at, and seeing people who were kind of at a regional institution who were choosing degree programs because they knew they would be able to get a job. Being in the [name of college]...the degree programs that we offered were degrees in nursing, social work, criminal justice, so I had a lot of students who were very focused on the end result of a career and not necessarily the process.

One person that Anne turned to to help her make sense of her interactions with her students and what they meant for her as a student affairs professional was her supervisor:

He really helped lay out the various fields I was going to look into when I was job searching and he was very clear with me in saying you know I just don't think an institution like [name of institution] is where you are going to be happy and be successful as a student affairs practitioner. He was like you are doing a great job here, but I think that you need something else. I think that you need to be at a large state institution that is relatively selective academically and we had a lot of conversations about that because I struggled with...well what do you mean when you say that because there was some interpretation that I got from those suggestions.

Despite her supervisor's affirming her own beliefs that Anne would fit in better at a different type of institution, Anne began wondering what such a conclusion meant about her, indicating that she was beginning to understand how others might view her.

Anne's interactions with her peers were another place where Anne was having a hard time making connections with others. It was also another place where Anne approached the relationship confident that she understood how others would react to her personality based on what she understood to be the correct impression of her personality. So, Anne was surprised when people saw her as different than how she saw herself. Prior to entering the program Anne understood herself to be one of the more sensitive people in the classroom when comparing herself to her peers, and through her time in the student affairs preparation program she came to understand that her peers saw her as firm:

In my undergraduate experience, I had really kind of identified myself as a really sensitive person in my degree program. I was around people who would say I'm going to be the next senator or I'm going to do whatever, I mean a very competitive environment at a research one type institution and I really think that's why I really latched on to the idea of helping people. You know, counseling and advising people in a student setting I would really be good at that because you know I've had this experience an out-of-state student and not knowing what I was expecting. Then when I was in the program at [name of student affairs preparation program] and surrounded by other people who had, you know, self-selected in coming into the environment of higher

education and student affairs I found myself with my peers...you know my peers really perceiving me as someone who was maybe a little bit more firm, not that anyone would say that I wasn't compassionate or considerate, but I definitely had the reputation for being a little bit firm.

Anne had difficulty relating to her peers and understanding why her peers saw her as "firm." To understand why her peers might see her this way, Anne applied the struggle she was experiencing between academic and practical:

I think that [the reason her peers found her to be firm] was because I was in a position of academic advising where I knew with my students a lot of their ability to stay at the institution and be successful in college...a lot of that fell on me in my assistantship and not to make a judgment call against other people's positions, but you know I did get some backlash from people who maybe had assistantships in the [name of assistantship site] working on things and you know, programming type positions.

Part of the frustration for Anne when it came to relating to her peers was not just that they saw her as firm, but that she again thought that her perspective was the right perspective. For example, Anne valued her own big school experience over her peers' small, private school experience and did not understand why her peers did not do the same:

And then going into student affairs where a lot of people are drawn to the profession because they had a really intimate undergraduate experience with student affairs practitioners or faculty members because they were at a small, either private institution or just, well actually most of my peers were...would

have fallen into that category of a small, private institution you know in the state where they grew up, or whatever, you know a lot of people were from [name of state], and so I had a lot of struggles kind of adapting to that perspective and seeing how their undergraduate experience impacted their idea about what student affairs was and the role of the practitioner. I was always really frustrated with kind of their initial just lack of interest in working at a large, state institution because my philosophy had always been the only job I am going to apply to are at large, state institutions because that's where students need compassionate student affairs professionals because they think they are a number in the classroom or because they are at a research one institution where faculty...where you need to have research to be able to stay your grant funding you know whatnot.

Anne recognized that her peers had different opinions than she, which led to frustration for Anne as she struggled to understand her peers' perspectives. As Anne began to see others' perspectives (e.g., her students', peers', supervisor's) she began to question who she was and what others' perspectives meant about her as a person.

Anne's belief that there was one conclusion that should be reached by everyone about what was right was not just limited to her interactions with others. Anne took the same approach when first trying to understand student development theory. When asked about her biggest disappointment while in the program Anne described the emphasis placed on using student development theory. To Anne, she felt as though she was being forced to use student development theory in a rigid, prescriptive way and that made her uncomfortable:

I guess I struggled with the emphasis placed on student development theory because my take on it, and how I have used it as a practitioner, is essentially I, you know, am aware of the theories that exist. I'm knowledgeable of them and I kind of like to use them as a foundation to understanding where a student is coming from but very loosely, so as to not make assumptions. I felt that in [name of student affairs preparation program] program student development theory was kind of used as a okay if a student is demonstrating these or saying these things or presenting this, you should really use this as a framework to go by and there was always the caveat that every student is different therefore bringing a variety of life experiences to the table. I still felt kind of in my heart that it was kind of, you know, these things need to be used. I didn't necessarily agree with that and I definitely as a practitioner don't follow.

Anne indicated that what made her uncomfortable were the assumptions she was feeling forced to make within her "heart." When encouraged to talk about theory further, Anne's belief in a divide between doing academic work and practical work emerged as she justified why she was not able to apply theory to the work she was doing in her assistantship while her peers could:

Sure, okay so in my theory class we did a lot of case studies in terms of develop "x" program. Develop a program for whatever, given the situation, and use a theory to rationalize why you would set up this program that way. I really struggled with doing that. I felt that my peers who were in Residence Life setting or some of my peers who were in other areas were very successful

at being intentional about how they were developing programming using theory...as a foundation, and a lot of the programming that I did, that I worked with the [official title] scholars program and I also worked with the institution's honors program. I deliberately sought out academic environments and experiences because that was what I was comfortable with, and what I enjoyed, and I don't ever feel as though I was ever deliberate in applying theory into the programs that I was doing. It was more of an academic experience.

To remedy her challenges with theory, Anne chose to remove herself from having to deal with it by no longer pursuing student development theory classes, and justified her decision to do so because others in student affairs also do not have student development theory experience:

I felt that [name of student affairs preparation program] program spent a lot of time working on those theories and so I thought I did not choose to take advanced theory at [name of student affairs preparation program] so I only had the one semester. I mean it was brought up in other courses, but not in a specific theory based course and I know that [name of student affairs preparation program] has a type of reputation for being that type of program, so I know that other student affairs practitioners aren't coming from that experience.

Yet, despite Anne's decision to discontinue coursework in student development theory because it did not connect to the academic work she was doing in her assistantship, Anne began to "see" theory in her assistantship. Anne could recognize

theory, beginning to view her experiences from a theoretical perspective, but was not choosing to use it intentionally, like some of her peers:

I would see theory though...for example for the honors program I did a health care reform program where we brought people together, we had two guest speakers who were kind of on both sides of the issues and we just had a discussion on the media's involvement on our perception of health care reform and it was very clear in some of the things the students were saying that they were bringing with them some things from home or the environment...I was working with first year students, and it was just kind of an inability to see a gray area they were very x or y in terms of how they would approach this, but I never really went about creating the program to have that happen. It was a little bit more organic, but I knew that some of my peers were very intentional about how they set up their programming to work with development theory.

Anne was unable to use the theory she was learning about in the classroom and intentionally use it to guide her practice.

An Internal Shift

Anne's recognition of her ability to make a choice after her first semester, particularly after receiving her grades, gave her the support she needed to change her approach to her student affairs preparation program experience. Anne decided to explore the field more, and found that she was looking forward to the job search. Anne was also glad that she completed a thesis, as it did allow her the creativity she desired:

I had a very difficult first semester which again I have referenced before just in terms of making a transition to what I perceive is a very kind of practical, career based program and I got B's in all of my courses. After that first semester I really decided, no you have really not spent enough time exploring this field and you...you know I had to give myself a pep talk and I knew that ultimately that it was the career that I wanted to do and that I wanted to pursue and that I would be happy once I had the opportunity to make some of my own choices whether it be electives or when I went into the job search the types of institutions that I knew I would be happy working at. After that I was able to get a 4.0 every semester and I just had an attitude change. It wasn't really the grades it was a reflection of an attitude change. I guess the other thing was that I was really proud of my master's thesis because it was something I didn't have to do, but that it was something I did for myself because I knew that it would make me happy and that at the end of the day when I tell people I have a master's degree in higher education student affairs no one knows what that is and I can produce this work and say, but I did this and I'm really proud of it because I brought my own interest too and created it.

Anne described the internal change she made as an "attitude" change and noted that it often sounded like an internal dialogue she was having with herself. What Anne identified as an internal shift was her ability to now take on the perspective of another, and she began using that perspective to evaluate her own interests, which were originally what she used to make meaning of her experiences:

I had to stop and say okay well you have had a full four year education at an institution that does draw from a lot of different places, were you really this open-minded, this progressive when you first started at [name of undergraduate institution]? You need to reflect on where you are now and realize you are helping students to get somewhere else.

I knew that I was coming from an academic experience...I also knew that my personal level of motivation and my personality in general tends to be high expectations of people. I don't have a lot of patience for individuals in my life if they aren't the caliber of person that I want to spend my time with. So, I knew that I was kind of bringing the combination of those two elements together, so I was constantly double checking myself to make sure that...you know it was important to understand where I was...and just not even that, but that you are working with, again my advising load was primarily first year students and then my teaching load was primarily first year students, so kind of keeping that in check. Are these expectations reasonable for [name of institution], or not really? And that the issue is...are these expectations reasonable for an 18 year old that just really started college? I really struggled to remember okay what was I able to do when I was 18 years old, what was reasonable for an 18 year old?

Anne also found support for her new way of making meaning through external validation: GPA rise to a 4.0, a completed master's thesis, and successful experiences with undergraduate students. One experience with an undergraduate student that

Anne identified as meaningful involved career counseling regarding the selection of a major:

This one student [on academic warning] came in and she was in our applied health sciences degree program. She wanted to go to physical therapy doctoral program and she had gotten a 1.2 GPA I remember, and I was kind of telling her that to be accepted into a physical therapy program a 3.5 GPA or better...you know this might not be something that is going to happen for you because she had failed introductory science courses and obviously that doctoral degree program would continually be going off that foundation of knowledge and she was not going to be able to do this. So, I was like okay let's think of something else she might want to be looking towards going into and she told me pediatrics and we had to sit and have a discussion about pediatrician is a physician that is medical school, if PT school is something we don't think you can be successful at potentially getting into then medical school probably in that same boat. So she clearly did not have a background in kind of researching these degree programs not being able to identify that a pediatrician was a medical doctor. Working with her over the course of the semester and again, from my experience at [name of institution] knowing that a lot of the students are very career driven whether for various reasons, whether for financially to pay bills or that was their motivation for being in college, I knew that a lot of these students on academic warning probation it was about finding them a career match and then also figuring out if the course work would be something that is compatible with their interests as well. So

after talking to her during some sessions she talked about her experience working in a nursing home and how much she enjoyed it and I began to explain to her in our college we have a degree program in gerontology do you know what that means? No. Well actually it's the psychological and medical study behind aging do you think that is something you might be interested in doing? And just again got really excited and explored the field the degree program and everything. She actually came back the next fall because I had worked with her in my first year and just told me that she love gerontology. She had gotten a 3.0 her second semester and had a full summer internship in a nursing home and was really excited and she thought that I had changed her life. I mean that is kind of dramatic, but I really appreciated it because I knew that kind of working with her and discovering this passion had really helped her be successful. I was really proud of myself again for getting over the attitude adjustment that I needed to have about the institution and their students and really applying what I had seen about the culture and the institution to the student and helping them be successful.

Anne's experiences putting into practice the knowledge she had obtained whether in or prior to graduate school, as well as Anne experiencing successful interactions with undergraduate students gave her a sense of confidence for the internal shift she had made. It was validation for the way that she was approaching her work in that she was able to put what she was learning into practice because she beginning to consider others' perspectives.

Anne's internal shift, and the external validation she felt when making the shift, allowed her to become comfortable with others having different experiences and what that meant for her. Anne began to understand that her experiences and someone else's might not be the same or that they may not arrive at the same conclusion. This also meant that Anne was beginning to understand that her typical approach may not work for everyone and that she might have to adjust it:

I felt that in the discussions that I was having in and out of the classroom I really got to know my classmates and I saw how their life experiences and educational experiences contributed to who they are as a person. I think it changed me in the fact of being more appreciative of the educational opportunities that I have and have had and also a greater understanding of what it means to be open-minded and think about what brings someone to feel the way that they do about a given topic or anything along those lines.

I learned to be a better listener. I am a very opinionated person and I had always felt that I was really open-minded and would never...I don't know that I wasn't judgmental and that if people had opinions that I would work really hard to understand that. It wasn't until my [name of student affairs preparation program] experience and some of my course that I really had the opportunity to realize that I do have a tendency to be more...to put my opinions out there first as opposed to listening and I suppose that is kind of why I was drawn to counseling originally and I was thinking well most people come to me for advice because they think I have really sound judgment and that is what people appreciate about me. Once you start going into advising,

anyone who thinks that you talking is the most important thing is going to fail miserably in the profession, so I think my assistantship combined with working with my classmates, I really learned that about myself and about working with others.

Anne's ability to view others' perspectives allowed her to make meaning of her personality by comparing and contrasting how she might appear to be different in different environments, and how she might need to adjust or learn to become comfortable with it:

I think I talked about this in our first meeting, or our first discussion, about how I had kind of perceived myself and then how I was being perceived by others in my undergraduate experience as someone who was very sensitive and caring and then I kind of took on that role and I thought okay, so I'm not going to be a scientist so I will take care of other people and so but then when I came to [name of student affairs preparation program] I definitely got a different reaction from some of my classmates as someone who is a little bit more maybe serious or who didn't accept excuses from students and really kind of had high expectations for people. I think through my [name of student affairs preparation program] experience I think I found kind of a happy medium in that I'm still always going to be who I am, but different environments are going to bring out my personality in different ways, and I think as long as I am in higher education, as long as I am doing some sort of career counseling or academic advising...I am sure that I will always be perceived as someone who is serious, has high expectations for people and

that again, I don't take excuses. I'm sure if you were to ask me tomorrow if I were to go get a job in the business world I would fail immediately because I would care too much. I would let people take off of work because their dog was sick and that kind of stuff. I guess I am always going to be the same kind of person, but being in higher education that type of environment is going to bring a different perspective then what other people will also draw in the profession.

Finally, due to the internal shift Anne made, she became more comfortable with theory, seeing it more as a tool to inform her practice and help her understand better where a student is coming from, while understanding that there is not a cookie cutter approach to its application:

So Chickering and Reisser, I definitely used their theory a lot when I feel like I'm not connecting with a student in a one-on-one appointment. I don't know if I had to write this down for you, but I'm a health professions advisor at the [name of institution] so most of my job is primarily one-on-one appointments with students and I definitely resorted to the vectors a lot, in terms of if I feel like a student is having a difficult time communicating with me and I try to understand which vector has this student not developed yet and how can I help them and assist them in getting there. I definitely use Perry a lot in terms of cognitive development and students that tell me they can't come up with a reason that they want to pursue medicine except for the fact that their parents are physicians or they feel a lot of pressure at home to kind of follow that career path, but I don't necessarily...a students presents this, and I'm thinking

about the parents and the pressure, and I'm thinking about Perry but I'm also saying there is more to this, and I mean I'm let's talk about, I mean is there a cultural influence coming in here. What else is going on in your life and that's just really important to me, to be aware that those theories are out there and refer to them, but not go by the book about what's next, especially some of the theories that are out there now that are very strongly linked to ethnicity or culture. I struggle with this is all I know and I'm going to apply this to you because this is what I'm observing.

Moving Out of Following Her Personal Interests

Anne entered the program making meaning of her experiences and who she was through her own interests and was confident of her beliefs regarding herself and others. Her personal interests were obtained from or validated by those Anne perceived to be knowledgeable, which did not include her peers or the undergraduate students with whom she worked, making it difficult for her to connect to them. This behavior of defining herself through her personal interests made it so that self-reflection was particularly challenging for Anne. She could not understand why her own thoughts and feelings mattered to others, and viewed the process of self-reflection as anti-intellectual. A transition occurred in terms of how Anne made sense of her experiences when she began to see herself through others', including her peers', perspectives. This transition allowed her to begin letting go of her belief in one right path for everyone and caused her to question how she defined herself. Helpful to this transition for Anne were several successful academic advising experiences she had with undergraduate students that allowed her to put into practice

what she learned in the classroom, a close relationship with a peer friend who had different Christian beliefs, and peers who did not hold the same beliefs about higher education or see her the same way that she saw herself.

Kelly

Originally from New England, Kelly grew up attracted to the helping professions thinking that ultimately she wanted to be a teacher and a coach. Kelly ended up attending college 12 hours away from her hometown and because she did not have very many friends that she knew, she got involved in student activities. “For all four years that I was in undergrad, I worked with the student activities board and I also worked in the registrar’s office, and in the bowling alley.” She first heard about the profession of student affairs from one of her advisors, who asked her one day if she knew that she could “do this,” (run student activities) for a living. When the Coordinator of Student Activities position opened up at her alma mater during her senior year, Kelly applied and got the position.

Desire to Grow as a Student Affairs Professional

For two years, Kelly worked as the Coordinator of Student Activities, helping with student activities and coaching during the school year, and summer conferences during the summer. It was during this time that she attended her first international conference. There, she met several people who had graduated from a variety of student affairs preparation programs who encouraged her to get her master’s degree. The encouragement that Kelly received to apply to student affairs preparation programs was similar to the encouragement Kelly received to apply for the position at her alma mater, and led to Kelly’s decision to apply to two student affairs preparation

programs. After all, if she did not get in she could always keep her current position. Plus, Kelly knew that she would, one day, like to be a director or a dean, which meant that eventually she would have to obtain her master's degree. Kelly was also aware that one way for student affairs professionals to earn respect from faculty was for them to obtain graduate degrees, "I think from what I had talked to other people about a lot of the discourse between student affairs and academic affairs stemmed from staff members and then faculty...it had to do with the difference in degrees." Kelly applied to [name of student affairs preparation program] and [name of student affairs preparation program] and was admitted to both programs.

For Kelly, one of the nice parts about her admission into both programs was their location. Kelly had a friend living not too far from both institutions, and had arranged with her friend that if she did decide to get her master's degree she would room with her, despite the commute:

I think the hardest part for me was that I lived in [name of city] and commuted to [name of institution], and so something negative for me is that the whole culture is based around the assistantship and that is something you know going in because you aren't admitted into the program unless you get an assistantship. There were students who drove all of the way from [name of town] and [name of town], and that is a good two hour drive. Granted I only had to drive a half hour.

Even with the commute, there were experiences Kelly looked forward to. One of those opportunities was being able to independently pursue her interest in faith and spiritual development while in graduate school:

When I grew up, my mom was a musician and she played for three of the local churches in town, and I had always gone to church and always been involved in a youth group, and that was one of the other things that I did when I graduated from undergrad college, you know I volunteered my time to work with youth in the area. It was a good way to get to know people and to feel like I was doing something to help. So just through like student affairs and you know highered.com and different like journals that we were subscribed to through my job at [name of institution], I had already read a few articles on faith and spirituality by [name of professor] and I was really intrigued to learn about how it effects students when they come to college because I had the same thing too. Because I was so involved in church, like me not going to [name of institution] in [name of town] that is where everyone tended to go because that was you know the local school associated with our church and they all said how are you going to make it? You won't know anyone. You won't have a church. And I was like, no, I will take that upon myself. That was one of those things, most people complain when they graduate from high school, ah I wish people would stop asking me what I'm going to major in and where I am going to go, and for me I was sick of people asking me how I wasn't going to become an alcoholic and fall from my faith. So, I was...I had actually had a few books on my shelf and [name of professor] actually was my advisor and so to me I was like I was all geeked out about that.

The Assistantship. Kelly was also looking forward to the experiences she would obtain in her assistantship:

The woman who offered me the assistantship was [name of woman]. She was the regional president for [name of association] and I had been working with her for three years, as a student and then as a professional and to me it was a great opportunity to work with her and to still kind of stay within the realm of the people I had worked with in the past. So, I knew that going to school and then working with her would be a really... would be kind of like a comfortable transfer. And that was another thing, I talked to the guys at [name of student affairs preparation program] and I was like... I didn't feel like it was as hands on a program because you didn't have to have an assistantship to be in the program you could just take classes and work part time but you didn't necessarily have an assistantship to go along with what you are learning.

Although Kelly anticipated a fairly smooth transition into her assistantship because of her prior connections, the responsibilities Kelly was given were new. Before her assistantship, Kelly's experiences involved student activities programming. Her assistantship gave her the chance to acquire practical experiences in a new area: the student union side of student activities:

Yeah, well like I said, we ran the facilities, anything that had to do with the building and the activities that were in the building we were in charge of and that is why I did events through the pub because the pub was in our place, so in addition to me, there were other students who had assistantships in student activities and a whole other director on the other side of the building who were in charge of actually like campus student activities.

For Kelly, the assistantship experience was where the connection between what she was learning in the classroom connected to the work she was being asked to do within the field of student affairs:

I mean for the most part without having an assistantship we wouldn't have had to be on campus except to take classes, so it pushed us to understand the school where we were and be engaged and involved in our learning and be able to put it into practice while we were learning it. In talking in the discussions...it was...this week I did this and it really helped me realize what made sense where if we hadn't had an assistantship...I can very much see myself working more and doing more school work but not necessarily staying on campus or getting to know, you know, undergrad students which are essentially who we would be working with once we are done.

Despite the connections Kelly was able to make through her assistantship, she still found that she struggled within her assistantship:

Yeah, I mean the really...the problem, and I wouldn't say problem, but for lack of a better word, I will...that I had worked at the institution that I went to, so it was an easy transition for me to know what the students would like to continue doing and what had worked in the past, so I had a large area to work with knowing that this hadn't worked and maybe if we did this it would be better, and I knew what places were around. When I went to [name of student affairs preparation program] they said here is your budget, here is what has worked in the past, try this, I mean I really, it was really kind of like a shot in the dark, and my boss was really good about being like yeah you know it is up

to you. Her coined motto was, “it’s a crapshoot” because one year it might work and another no one will show up, and if you can get five students to an event is that a success, I don’t know? And to me, if you can imagine, you are at a school of 1800 I would usually have about 100 to 300 people at some of the events that I ran. I never had more than probably, 50 at any of the events that I ran at [name of institution] and so to me that was almost like a failure, because with 20,000 students and you are only getting 50 and when there was 1800 and you got 300 that was a huge percentage of the population.

Although she felt like she was failing at the work she was doing, and brought with her experiences in which she was able to get a greater turnout for the programming she was doing, Kelly did not question her supervisor’s philosophy. Instead, she adopted the philosophy in her assistantship practice as though it were her own.

Coursework. Beside the assistantship, and being at a large, state institution, another aspect of the student affairs preparation program Kelly looked forward to experiencing was the new knowledge she would obtain from her coursework:

What did I expect? I think for me, I had gotten the core curriculum and I knew what classes were going to be. I wasn’t aware of how small the classes were, which I really loved because you really had the chance to get to know everyone in your cohort and all of your professors, and I think what I expected was just, in addition to what I had already learned because I wasn’t fresh out of college, I was hoping to get a different perspective on the profession and what it would be like to be in a different environment because I studied abroad

for a semester so I had gone to a larger institution for a semester, but I had never worked at one.

Specifically, Kelly was hoping that this new knowledge would not only give her a new perspective but also expand the skills she had acquired from the position she held before attending graduate school thereby making her skills more transferable to a wider variety of institutions:

And, so for me it was an opportunity for me to expand my skills that I had learned for the past three years at [name of undergraduate institution], and to see if what I knew could even transfer to that kind of culture, and so I learned a lot about how to work in that environment, how to encourage students. I had never read a lot on student development, and so for me, taking it further than the Myers-Briggs, it was really good to get into how I could work better and produce an outcome. I mean, I am working in an environment now, in a small school where they don't even have outcomes for some of their programs and I am baffled by that.

I think for myself just getting the understanding of how a larger school operated...it was interesting for me to learn about state funding and government funding whereas I had only had experience at a private institution and it was mostly endowment and gifts, so personally just having more options with a school that was larger obviously there was more avenues with things to do and more contacts and more people. I mean I meet people who went to [name of student affairs preparation program] all of the time and not necessarily people who even know about [name of undergraduate institution].

Working Through New Experiences

Even though Kelly was able to anticipate most of the new experiences she would be having while in graduate school, she still found herself experiencing some surprises:

Each class was about, I mean I think the smallest class I had was 8 and the highest was maybe 18, but in my mind I had thought that more people were accepted and that there would be...because it was only a two year program, most of your classes were with people in your cohort and a few mixed.

Adjusting to a smaller than expected class size was a surprise for Kelly that she quickly adjusted to. However, it was harder for her to make sense of the surprises she experienced in her assistantship, many of which were connected to the institution's culture:

It was different for me because I was doing a lot of faculty programming where I had never done that before. I was doing [name of institutional tradition] that would have been scoffed at by another institution. That was kind of a cultural thing that had been happening for about 6 years before I even got there and when I read the notes from the past intern before me, she was like, I will be sad about two things...if you don't have fun and learn something and if you don't do [name of institutional tradition], so I thought that was a really interesting thing for me because our faculty and staff loved that so much. It was almost like terrifying for me because it made a population of regulars who expected a, b, and c, but it was not allowing new people to come. Actually it only allowed about 30 people to come, and by the

end of the first year that I started we were doing it in a different room, which got a lot of negative and positive feedback, but by putting it in a bigger room we could have more people. So we would have 60 people come instead of just the regulars who felt entitled because they viewed it as their event.

In order to make the changes she felt were needed to the [name of institutional tradition] Kelly sought out support from her advisor:

Yeah, that was...there were a lot of one-on-ones about that. It was scary to me to change something that had been going on for so long, but then we just changed how the assessment worked and we got a lot of feedback, which was really good.

Kelly recognized her limitations to determine for herself how to make the changes to the [name of institutional tradition], and sought encouragement from her supervisor before making any decisions.

Kelly also sought out and received support from the faculty through her coursework when she was experiencing challenge within her assistantship:

We also had to do monthly reflections that were probably, I mean there were different prompts each time, and there was a whole binder of different worksheets that we could go through, and it just helped us think through the top three important things that happened. Or, what we thought was going well and what we thought wasn't, and then also our strengths and weaknesses and then the competencies like through what we were doing were translating, and so we would take different indicators and then take them again at the end of the semester and then kind of see, for instance, just through talking in those

classes you could get feedback from the other students in the class and from the professors. A lot of times you know I was frustrated say about the expectations thing, [name of professor] would respond to all of our reflections that we sent her and she was able to kind of talk, you know almost be like a mediator too, she is the one that came in and sat and talked with my supervisor and myself and we just kind of worked through [my job performance issues] and that is how we figured it out because it was really...it was kind of stressful because I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I was doing everything I thought I was supposed to be doing, I just wasn't doing all of the criteria that my supervisor had wanted, so that was interesting too because the supervisors give us feedback every semester, so it was really interesting to see how my feedback changed. At first she just thought that I wasn't working very hard given the things that she saw, but I just didn't want to overstep my bounds.

Although Kelly received the support she needed from the faculty to work through the issues in her assistantship, if she had taken the initiative to set expectations for her assistantship position with her supervisor when she began the job, she might not have had to experience issues with her assistantship supervisor.

Cause my whole first semester, my boss, like I had said I had known her, and I was excited about the transition. But to be honest it was really hard because she had lost her director so I got my assistantship was working in the student union, so not even student activities, but just student union, so she was in charge of custodial and set ups and doing things just like pop programming

and things like that, so we were on the smaller scale, we didn't have a very big budget, and her boss was gone she had gotten to take on all of those responsibilities because they didn't rehire someone, so she was splitting another jobs responsibility with one other person and she was essentially now the assistant director of the Union and when I got there because she knew that I knew how to do my job and we had worked together in the past, she had just expected that I was just going to take it and run with it. And me, I got there and I was waiting for her to give me something to do, so we learned real quick that we had to define what those roles were because she just thought I was going to run, and I didn't want to come in and just act like I knew everything. That is actually why she hired me. She was like I know you know everything, just do it and I was like wow I am really sorry, so that was a rough first semester and a really hard transition because we were both expecting each other to do different things. So that was one of the things that surprised me through my assistantship.

Establishing expectations for herself and initiating the establishment of them for others was something Kelly said she learned during her time in the program. Another way that Kelly learned the importance of expectations while in the program was through the establishment of classroom expectations.

We always had [set classroom expectations] for every class. You know the teacher would set it with us at the beginning of the class and we could raise our hands and put things on the board of what we expected the class environment to be like and a lot of times it would be anywhere from 10 bullets

to 15 bullets and someone always put on there, you know, that if you didn't do the reading don't just talk.

Similar to the purpose of establishing expectations for her assistantship, Kelly was able to see the purpose of establishing classroom expectations:

The expectation was that everyone participated and you know the students held each other accountable for not doing the reading, not just the professors. Just like in the work environment where if your boss is a great boss then you are encouraged to work hard for them and for yourself. You know we really worked hard because we wanted to be a part of the conversation and what was going on and you know yeah we had a lot of reading to do, but if we didn't do it we were just hurting the class and people knew. It was not where you could go in and get away with just making stuff up. So, I mean, and we were highly encouraged to use the authors name and not say refer to the article because we probably you know read 10 articles for that day and so that was really good because when you are conversing about it using the names of who wrote it then you are owning it and keeping that knowledge in your head too.

I mean a lot of what we talked about in class reflected what we did in our jobs, so you know we had our own life experience that we were working with day-to-day, but also you know being able to synthesize that knowledge which was the main point about why we were there. So, yeah we could talk until we were blue in the face about what we had done in our assistantship or what we had done in the past, but if we couldn't relate it to what we were learning or

explain how a theory fit into what we were doing or why we were doing it then someone would shut us up real quick.

Kelly also witnessed the classroom expectations being upheld, and while she herself never called anyone out on a violation, she was always aware when someone did it:

No, no, I was so excited to be there after being a professional for two years that I had already read most of the books before we even got to class. There were times that I mean and it would be the students who went to school at big huge institutions like [name of institution] or [name of institution] and they would just...kind of insert themselves into that person's conversation, I mean I never did it because I thought it was just too much and I don't want to be controversial, but you could tell if someone was blubbing and a few times teachers did just kind of say okay we are switching gears and just kind of cut people off. And one time I do remember specifically a professor saying that is an interesting thought but how does that relate to what we are talking about based on this article, so they were kind of saying yes you can relate to this situation, but what specifically does the article say.

Kelly's choice to not say anything when the classroom expectations were being violated for fear of being controversial is consistent with her choice to wait for her supervisor to give her instruction in her assistantship. Kelly believed that others would think she was contentious if she spoke up, which mattered to her, as she did not want others to see her negatively.

Even though Kelly was concerned about how others would see her, there was at least one time that she made a decision knowing that she was going to be

disappointing others. Kelly made the decision to obtain another job, outside her assistantship, at a supermarket to help pay for school. The faculty attempted to discourage Kelly from choosing to work an extra job, which left Kelly feeling frustrated and devalued:

It was hard because you want so hard to do everything you can for class and for your assistantship, but the thing is too that we only got paid enough to cover living expenses, and I ended up getting a lot of student loans, and still ended up having to get a part time job to support myself and if you weren't living on campus, like working for residence life or things like that then you pretty much either had to have a sweet savings account or eat peanut butter and jelly. So that was kind of a...the biggest frustration for me was not only did I have student events that I would find out about a week in advance, and pray to God that I didn't get fired from my supermarket job, but it was that feeling of not being appreciated knowing that I was doing 8 hours of school work, 10 hours of working at [name of institution], sleeping maybe like three hours before, so that to me would be my only negative. But not all students, I mean I was highly discouraged from having a job. I mean I think I was only maybe one of five who had an outside job.

Kelly also experienced being discouraged from working at the supermarket by her assistantship supervisor, which resulted in hardship for her while trying to balance all of her responsibilities:

Mostly my advisor...my academic advisor, and my boss...my assistantship boss because you know we had a really crazy schedule for our students, we

had six undergraduate students who were running events and if for any reason they couldn't do something it would default to me. So if I had to work at another job then I was unable to help in that situation so it was really hard to be as flexible having a job that required me to be not on campus, so that was hard. Working through that with my assistantship supervisor at first...you know I was a little bit nervous to even tell her that I had another job just because I didn't want her to think that I wasn't getting things done or to have any reason to think like oh you look really tired today, so it was hard because it was coming from all angles...even the head of the program kind of took me aside and was like we really don't recommend that you have an outside job because of the hours that are required from you, so it took a lot of compromise...you know it worked out because I really didn't have a choice, but if I hadn't had to work I wouldn't have.

Kelly's concern for what others would think of her and not wanting to disappoint them often resulted in her decision to wait for instruction. Kelly connected her approach to her personality, and used it as a teaching tool she used to help others learn:

A lot of it...I think a lot of it has to do with my personality like I can be really intense about some things and you know, I just don't want to be considered like a bully. And I think there are different ways to approach things and it has taken me a while and some coaching to be I guess softer in my approach. So for me it is constantly stepping back and letting other people come up with the conclusions instead of just throwing things out there and running with it.

She came to this conclusion about her personality based on observation, as well as her belief that others with more experience have something to offer. She also believed in valuing the perspective of individuals who have been at an institution longer:

I think for myself I have watched how other people react and try to make sure...I mean I think too just going into a new environment, I don't want to be the person who comes in and acts like...I don't know...I don't think I have ever been called a know it all and I don't think that I am one, but I feel like I can learn from other people and I want to make sure that I understand the environment before I toss out ideas, and especially from people who have been here from 3-5 years, when they are the ones recommending something it seems to have a little bit more validity or people are more apt to jump on that band wagon then they are the new person.

Kelly understood her opinion to be of less worth since she did not have as much experience as others around her, and was concerned that if she shared her thoughts people might not listen to them due to her limited experience.

Yet, Kelly did have successful experiences within the preparation program she could draw from demonstrating that she could put into practice what she was learning in the classroom. One example was that she was able to connect to the student assistants she worked with in her assistantship so that by the end of the semester the student assistants had learned their work responsibilities:

We had...in any given semester, we had 5-7 student assistants who we called interns who were getting credit for class, so they weren't getting paid but they were getting credit, so they would definitely come to their office hours and

help us do certain events, so then they had to do one group project, just kind of like end the semester and show what they have learned too. She [Kelly's supervisor] would say this to them, you've got Monday night events, and Wednesday night events, and weekend events and if nobody comes you know it's a crapshoot try new things, don't give up. But how do you tell the student that has got it in their head that it is not going to work? It is one of those things where you have to let them do it, not because you want them to fail but you want them to see that their efforts were notable...this year it is just not in and maybe it will be in next year, but it was also hard because those students changed every semester, so by the time we had trained them, you know by the middle of the semester, and they finally had it, you know going, it would basically be over by the time they caught on. I planned the first two weeks of all of the events, so I was there every day helping these interns figure out what they were doing before we could let them go off of their own.

Although it took some time, Kelly was eventually able to get into a pattern with her student assistants. Another experience Kelly had, connecting to students and putting into practice what she was learning, was through an outdoor summer leadership program:

I was chosen to go on a 7 day excursion 40 miles with 7 first year students who were incoming, so this was in August, they didn't know each other and they didn't know us. This was at the beginning of August and they would be starting school at the end of August. So we worked a semester just getting to know a lot of outdoor things that we would need to help them with. Every

group was given 7 students, one outdoor leadership person, a person who was certified in outdoor leadership experience, and then a staff or faculty member. What was funny is that the group that I was in didn't have a faculty or staff member. We had two administrators because not a lot of faculty had expressed interest. This was only the second year that they have done it, so it is still in its baby stages. What was really interesting to me, was that the other administrator didn't feel comfortable being in charge, so I ended up leading all of the different activities we had to do that normally would have been facilitated by a professor because they get credit for this experience, and then they would take it as a class their first semester. So that was amazing. So, 40 miles, I mean we were hiking anywhere from 6-8 miles per day. Some of these kids had way too much stuff on their backs. I mean it was a really cool experience, and to me it was a total case study in what we had learned the first year in my program, because I was watching this development and just the difference between the students, and some of the topics that we would talk about were really hard topics, but our students did really well. It was really cool to hear the other people in my group, like the adults, say things like you know you facilitated that really well. I never would have thought to do that. So, to me it was a really great experience to know that what I had done for the first two semesters I could put into practice.

Listening and observing similarities and differences between the students were helpful to Kelly in making connections with them.

Exploring the Classroom Experience

As Kelly began to see the connections between what she was learning in the classroom and her practice outside of the classroom, she began to wonder about the classroom experience she was having in the student affairs preparation program. She decided to take a course in a different graduate program: “Yeah, it seemed like nobody was taking outside classes and I thought that [a course in another department] sounded like a really interesting elective.” Kelly’s motivation for trying a class outside the program was two-fold. First, she thought that the elective sounded interesting. Second, she was curious to see if other graduate programs were as demanding as the one she was in:

I know that this is going to sound funny. I was like all of our classes in our cohort are so hard nothing outside of our program is going to be that difficult and I was right. To me, it was also a challenge to see how well I would do in a master’s level course that wasn’t our profession.

Her suspicions were confirmed when she took the class and felt that it was not very difficult. Another classroom dynamic that Kelly noticed as different was that she did not feel a connection to her classmates:

We had one book and we read maybe two chapters every week and then we were given presentation dates where we had to read an outside source about the topic or like deviant behavior, mine ended up being trafficking, sex trafficking in other countries and in America and so that class, I think for like a half an hour, I would explain the book that I read and give a presentation on sex statistics or certain things and then I had to write a paper about it, but the paper I think was only like five pages, and we had one test the whole class,

and so pretty much when we weren't doing our presentation he was just talking about the book. So, he was a great, great professor, he was really nice I really enjoyed him, he was so nice, he reminded me of Mr. Rogers, the nicest guy ever, and it was really fun to meet other people, but even then, I would see these people outside of class, even just a semester after we had taken it and they had already forgotten who I was. I think that might just be us too. I feel like our cohort was so intentional with relationships and people that we will know anyone from a hole in the ground, but these students were just in the class to fulfill one of their criminal justice requirements.

Again, Kelly noticed class expectations or the lack thereof and how they shaped her experience in the classroom:

I think for the most part, in the class that I took outside...I would almost say there was no expectation of everyone contributing in every class. There was just an expectation that hopefully you read and the professor was just going to talk about whatever he wanted to talk about and if there was room for questions at the end or a story or two from someone else then that was given. For [name of student affairs preparation program], all of the classes that I took with my cohort, it was expected that you were always listening and that you would offer something throughout the class at least three times. You know you couldn't just get away with sitting there or zoning out or doing something else and that is what I felt like when I went to this other class. You know other people were just kind of sitting there. Some of them were playing games on their computers, they just really weren't...it didn't even seem like

they were interested. So knowing in my cohort that we actually cared about what was going on and were obviously immersed in student affairs and the whole idea of what we were doing...knowing that we were all going to go into it after we graduated it seemed to have a different feel and we knew that going into the classroom. I still can't even tell you any of my classmates' names nor do I even remember the name of the professor. I can tell you what he looks like, but I don't even remember very much. I remember the books I read and some of the papers that I wrote, but it wasn't like it was a welcoming environment and so that was what was really the difference.

Another example of Kelly's exploration of her student affairs preparation program classroom experience was her choice to take the multicultural class. Kelly wanted to learn more about multiculturalism so that she could be a part of the professional conversation about the topic. Kelly noted, though, that it also helped that she enjoyed the professor:

I think at the time they were...it was a lot of discussion about core competencies and what was required and a lot of different institutions were trying to define for themselves what made the all around professional and this was one of the things that has been toyed with and never put into all of them. It was kind of expected, but not required not only for the program, but for different associations that I was a part of and so I just kept hearing about it and so I think for myself I just wanted to know more so that I could be involved in those conversations and not just kind of be an outsider hearing the conversations. I also really liked the teacher who was teaching it and so for

me it was twofold. You know, getting that understanding of what the big deal was and also for myself the knowledge...you think you know everything until you take the class and really had to ask yourself really hard questions or talk about situations that again may have just kind of been blown over.

Throughout the program, Kelly was always able to see the bigger connections happening through the program design. She recognized that the faculty were aware of and responded appropriately to issues that the students faced:

I think probably by the middle of the first semester I knew that it was really intentional because they [the faculty] had it down to a science. They knew when we were going to start being homesick to when we were going to start being sick of classes. They knew so many interesting details that just from patterns and trends from having the program for so long that it was almost comical that they were doing different presentations or bringing up different topics that were exactly how everyone was feeling. You were almost wondering if you were in some kind of weird science experiment, but it was just well timed and well placed and it was something that they see and go through every year.

Kelly was able to identify some of the knowledge and skills she brought to her graduate school experience, yet was surprised with how much she actually did know. She was also able to see how intentional the faculty was in creating a classroom environment with diverse experiences:

Well, I think I went in there with the idea that I had a lot of experience to bring and I think that helped me make friends and feel like I was a part of it.

It also really humbled me to realize how much I didn't know. I feel like it was a perfect fit for me because they knew...like they always knew. They knew that by having a mixture of students who came right out of undergrad and people who had been out in the field that that was going to be...that that was going to help with the dialogue and help people understand that there are so many differences...I mean I thought it was interesting...not because I thought I knew everything, but I thought I knew a lot more then I realized.

Having Others Think Well of Her

Kelly's ability to view herself from the perspective of another, led her to seek out experiences that would purposefully make her attractive to specific employers:

I was always hoping after graduation from [name of student affairs preparation program] that I would be back [name of home]; you know I had gone to school in [name of state]. I had lived there for four years, and now I was going to live there for another two years and my family is in [name of home], and my brother has kids, and I really wanted to be back. So, through researching a lot of the institutions around where my family lives, they have huge commuter populations, so I was like okay well if I am going to be an asset to a school that I'm applying to then I need to have a few more qualifications. So that was something that I did intentionally. I sought out opportunities in commuter services, just so that I could understand that population of students, so that when I went to interviews, I could talk about my thoughts and how I could assist in helping a program if they already had one or were in the process of starting one.

Kelly made a conscious decision to take advantage of experiences she believed would benefit her professionally. She saw that she could choose from a wide-variety of options, yet she continued to seek out experiences that she thought would cause others, in particular the Dean of Students, to think well of her:

I think I approach things more like not that I wasn't professional before, but thinking about how the chain of command works and what I need to do to move up in the world in this profession I think a lot of what...or how I act is so that...it is almost like I want to make sure that I'm in step with everyone else and if there is always a Dean of Students in the room they would be happy with how we would interact. I mean for me I want to try to be involved in as many things as I can to give myself as many different levels that are possible. I work in mentoring, I have also volunteered to work on judicial and just done different things to make sure that I'm getting a broad idea of a campus so that if I did go to another position they could say have you had experience with this and I could say yes I have I have been volunteering my time to go to the different j-board meetings and hearings to see how that process works otherwise I wouldn't have the leg up because I wouldn't have a clue how it works. So whenever there is an opportunity a lot of different departments go on field trips to other schools and I think that is really important to see how other things work, so when they say who has the time to do this, I try to make time to do that.

Even now, after the program, Kelly continues to look at her marketability from other people's perspectives:

Different...I would say I...I probably kept myself in a small niche and thought that I could only move up in that small bracket. I thought that I was going to be student affairs and in student activities and I was just going to be an assistant director and then be a director and then someday maybe get my PhD and be a dean. I thought that was the only track that I could take. I never thought of switching into academic affairs or you know jumping around to different areas and that is kind of nice because I have a broader range to pull from and can do different things so that I don't get burned out because that is something that I talk about with a lot of professionals is the burn out ratio. You do something long enough and it is going to get kind of hard and the hours too...I mean student activities is never ending, and it is kind of nice to have a 9-5 job right now.

In addition to seeking out various experiences, Kelly is more confident taking the knowledge she gained and applying it to her new job:

I definitely think that I put more value in my schooling then I think I would have if I just went to a program to get a degree. I feel like it makes me more confident and gives me a broader knowledge of what I need to do in any aspect of students, not just in one specific area, like not focusing just on student affairs, but academic affairs, and the whole college as its own entity. It definitely gives me more confidence and I know that I have the resources from my experience to go anywhere.

I think I still have the passion to want to work with students and now I just have some tools to back up why I do what I do and some knowledge to help

me along the way. I have a feeling that if I had gone straight from my first job to this job that I am doing now I would have been very ill equipped in understanding why students react in so many different ways because I worked with just a select bunch of students. It was the students who were on 17 different committees and had 13 jobs and wanted their transcript to be a million pages long. Not the students who I work with now who aren't in any clubs don't ever leave their rooms and are barely getting above a 1.5 GPA.

This new knowledge and deeper understanding for Kelly allowed her to connect to a wider range of students:

Just understanding the cycles that students go through, the transitions that they face when they enter college...anything from leaving their parents to trying to gain that role of autonomy. The decisions they are making based on their age, maturity, it all relates back to some of the theories that we have done.

Personally for me, I mean I never thought about students in that sense until I read a lot of the books that we talked about because I just went to college and thought that is what you had to do. I didn't know that I made certain decisions based on where I was at in my own life...from my past experiences and my current situation. I just dealt with it and moved forward. Other students aren't able to do that without a bit of encouragement and I think a lot of that is what I do for myself now...it is challenging and supporting, there are some students that I can challenge and they will step up to the challenge.

There are other students who will wither away and hide in the corner. Now I

understand that's a delicate balance whereas before I would have thought that person was kind of weak.

Despite feeling more confident, and expressing that she learned the importance of sitting down and articulating expectations, Kelly found herself again in her new position, watching and waiting to be invited in, as she was concerned about stepping on toes when interacting with her colleagues at work:

We have a program, a mentoring program that I think I mentioned was self-advocacy and helping students through their transition or getting students through classes, or just reading some of this that they may not understand what it required of them and it is a lot of trial and error and the other day one of my colleagues came in and just kind of grabbed books off my shelf and said, "you know it is ironic to me that we are trying all of these things and hoping they will work, when it is all right here. Like all of this research, I don't know why we haven't tried it." And so for me I am new, you know I haven't even been here five months, and it is hard for me to just jump in and recommend things that may or may not work just because I don't want to step on any toes so it is really awesome when other people can take those tools and say let's try this and so that is what I am really hoping for. In our meetings we have decided, you know we have weekly meetings, and we are just going to bring up different topics and different theories and just say you know this is how this can work for us so let's try it and then come back and we can talk about it. And that for me is really funny because I was immersed in it for so many years, and we intentionally did things to see how those worked and now

doing it again is really awesome. Some of these people haven't been to graduate school so they don't know how many times we have talked about it or done it, so I'm really glad to be in a position where I can help another institution with their growth and development. I mean, I am really eager and enthusiastic about it and hoping that the practices in these books do work so that they understand why there is research out there and why people keep going to grad school.

Kelly's apprehension to involve herself in her new position was noticed by her peers as well:

I got an email from my place of employment that asks you know, come to this conference, come talk about issues in student affairs, in higher education, and I sent an email to those three girls and said do you guys think I should go to this and you know that I'm new here and it says for administrators, and it says that everyone is welcome, do you guys think I should go at this point or do you think I should ignore this one? And they were all no you should go, come on you know this, and you can make connections, and so through their encouragement, you know normally I would have just deleted the email because I am still trying to transition back to the East coast, being close to my family, and getting used to my new job that I just started August 31st, but they were like no go it is free, why wouldn't you go, it is at your school, and it is not a big deal, so I mean that is really cool to me to just be able to shoot them an idea and get some feedback.

Waiting for Others

Kelly looked forward to learning new information and having new experiences while in the student affairs preparation program, while also building on the professional skills she brought with her to the program. Despite this hope, Kelly needed encouragement from others or often waited for others to give her direction instead of using her own experience as a guide. This process of waiting led to frustration for Kelly in her assistantship both externally in that she was being evaluated poorly by her supervisor, as well as internally in that she felt like she was failing at the work she was doing. Kelly did not want to disappoint others, hence her waiting for their opinions. Kelly's observation of the undergraduate students she worked with in her assistantship, as well as having a positive experience leading a group of students in the summer outdoor leadership program, helped Kelly become confident putting theory into practice. Yet, although she seemed more confident in her practice, she continued, as a new professional, to be concerned with having others think well of her, which continued to leave her waiting to hear others thoughts before she felt she could act or decide.

Micah

Micah was born and raised on the East coast. As an undergraduate student, Micah was set on becoming a biochemist, and although he completed his undergraduate degree in biochemistry, he was no longer interested in the profession at the time of his graduation; "I stuck with it to finish my degree just to sort of have something in place."

Micah's involvement as an undergraduate student in college was broad. He was a resident assistant (RA), joined a fraternity, and worked in both the campus life office and the Vice President for Student Affairs office. It was specifically through his position in the campus life office that Micah was invited to attend ACPA's Next Generation Conference, which according to Micah, "really helped solidify student affairs as an option" as a career. Micah received the opportunity to attend the conference because a fulltime staff member in the office of campus life was out on leave, and Micah had acquired some extra responsibilities within the office working with campus events. By the time he had attended the conference, Micah had missed the major deadlines to apply for admission into a student affairs preparation program, so Micah decided instead to work for two years within the field. Micah justified his decision to work for two years as a way to determine if he truly had an interest in student affairs:

I had missed the major deadlines for the programs, so I made a commitment to find a job in the field and work for two years and then, if I was still happy with what I was doing, then I would go and apply to grad school, so that was sort of the route I ended up taking to get to grad school.

Micah found a position at a small, private institution near his home where he was able to work in both residence life and student activities for two years. True to his plan, because he "was still happy" after his two years, Micah began researching student affairs preparation programs. Originally, Micah researched seven or eight student affairs preparation programs, before narrowing it down to a list of three.

Micah received help from his supervisor, whom he identified as a mentor, to help narrow down his interests:

When I applied to programs, I only applied to three schools. I applied to [name of student affairs prep program], [name of prep program], and [name of prep program]. So, those are the only three schools that I applied to. I looked at a larger scope and then started pairing them down to those three and really the driving force behind it was my supervisor at [name of institution]. He serves as my mentor currently and was really then. He really worked with me throughout the process and helping me make some of the decisions, helping me sort of really scope out what I was looking for in a program.

Micah's conversation with his supervisor regarding which student affairs preparation program to attend involved Micah's focusing in on what he wanted to get out of his time in a student affairs preparation program:

We definitely talked a lot about what type of program. So, am I looking for something more administrative, am I look for something that is more about student development, am I looking at a one year or two year?...what else did we talk about? Really it was about what was it that I was looking to accomplish while I was there. He had me looking at members of the faculty and what their research interests were to see if what I was interested in lined up with the work that they were doing. Sort of really looking into every aspect of the program. You know one of the other schools that was initially on my list was actually [name of institution] and then through some conversations I realized that it would be better for me to go somewhere else

and get a different experience because I have been in [name of state] my whole life and being able to talk to him about that and he was a grad of the [name of student affairs preparation program] program, so he provided me the perspective and so it is going to be better for me to go somewhere else and learn something new and be in a different place and have those experiences too.

Micah believed that if it were not for his mentor he would not have ended up in the student affairs preparation program that he did:

I definitely would have been lost in the process if it wasn't for [name of mentor]. He really, we took some time out of our one-on-ones each week to really focus on where I was going with my process for graduate school. He set aside...he got some readings that would help me. It was just really developmental for how he worked with me...I don't know if I would have ended up where I did if it wasn't for [name of mentor]. It was one of those things where I probably would have looked at [name of prep program] a little bit more as an option and you know staying in the same place would I have had the same growth that I ended up having? Would I have ended up in [name of state] now? I don't think I would have. I think I would have tried to stay in that location. I chose to move to [name of prep program] and by making that choice it was easier for me to choose to live [name of current location]. It really...he was really influential in helping me, not influencing me in my decision-making but helping me by asking questions, and allowing me to ask questions and just say you know this is what I am thinking and then

having him help me reflect on what those thoughts were and why I had the thoughts that I did.

Visiting the programs was also important to Micah in making his decision of what student affairs preparation program to attend:

I went and visited [name of student affairs preparation program] and [name of student affairs prep program] as a part of their interview days that were a part of the application process and I really was just sort of blown away by [name of student affairs prep program] and how that process looked and just the feel that I got when I was there. When I left, I knew that is where I wanted to be.

Part of the “feel” that Micah had was due to the cohort model at the student affairs preparation program he attended. For Micah, he knew that attending any of the student affairs preparation programs to which he had been offered admission would mean he was no longer living near his family:

In sort of comparing that to the other program it was just very much that the cohort model was something that I was looking for. Moving from [name of state] to a different state away from family I knew that I wanted to have that feeling. That there was a group of people who were going through the same thing with me, at the same time, who were also sort of uprooting themselves and moving to a new location. So, I think that factored into it.

The support and comfort found through the cohort model within the student affairs preparation program Micah chose to attend, was a present factor in Micah’s original decision to go into student affairs as he experienced his first international conference with a cohort of undergraduate peers:

[Attending the ACPA next generation conference] really helped me to see the profession of being a student affairs professional as being...a viable option, I would say is probably the best way to put it. You know I hear about it and I see it, I saw it on my undergraduate campus, but that is all that I really knew at that point, so being able to see other professionals from different campuses...really it was an immersion conference. I was with other undergraduate students who were considering going into the field of student affairs and having the time to interact with them and seeing what their experiences were too and having some of those conversations and knowing that we were all in the same boat. I guess I...really we were exploring what this looked like for us not really knowing...so I think it was having the opportunity to explore that in a safe space around a bunch of other people because my campus was really the only thing that I knew of that was talking about looking into student affairs beyond the undergraduate so I didn't really have other students I could talk with about it, so having that space that Next Generation provided an opportunity to really...it was that and I was fortunate to be able to stay for the rest of the conference, so being able to go to some of the sessions was really helpful, and you know it just really...I was extremely interested in the things I was hearing and I think it just really starting building, you know, this is something that I really want to do.

Similar to the comfort Micah felt with those he attended the Next Generation Conference, Micah received comfort from his cohort throughout his time in the

program. He shared that it was one of the methods he used to “get through” the program:

It was that opportunity to talk with other people who were experiencing some of the same things even though we might be in different assistantships or we were not in the same classrooms, but we are still having some similar experiences and being able to talk about them with others was definitely helpful and you know, I guess, the phrase I think of is that misery loves company. I mean we were all just overworked, and we still had papers and stuff and we had to read, and so just being with a group of people and some close friends who were all in that same boat together. It helps you get through it. You are provided the opportunity to vent. You could do that with people who at some point in time they are going to be in that same position and they are probably going to be looking at you for that opportunity too. So, I think it is having the ability and the chance with people who are experiencing, it might not be the same exact thing, but it is similar enough that they can relate to what you are going through and they can provide some insight and guidance if they are in the same similar situation.

Micah received support from his peers that composed his cohort as he experienced the preparation program and indicated that he reciprocated the support by providing it to his peers as well.

Despite working with his mentor to think through his decision to attend [name of student affairs preparation program], visiting the program, having a good “feel” about it, and selecting a program that would provide him with a cohort of peers going

through the same experience, Micah was still concerned about his decision to attend [name of student affairs preparation program]:

There was just that sense of you know, because as the end of my undergraduate career it was just like well at this point, I am getting this degree to get this degree. I wasn't necessarily invested in it. I was just hoping that the same thing wouldn't happen this time around too. I mean am I going to lose that drive that I had going into it, or am I going to be more concerned about practicing and not necessarily learning the theoretical aspects that are going to help me with my practice?

Micah's past experience led him to worry that his interest in obtaining a master's degree in student affairs might wane before graduation despite the experience he had working in the field. Micah recognized that he found the practical experience that he would obtain while in the student affairs preparation program to be attractive:

I knew that going in I was going to get a strong education in student development theory and that is something that I wanted. I think one of the other big factors is the assistantship. I had applied for it and was going to be working in fraternity and sorority life, and I think just working with students in general provides you with a lot of opportunities. You have, you are able to gain a lot of experience in a lot of different areas just from working in that. You are not necessarily getting a specialization, but rather you are sort of able to dip your toes into a little bit of everything. Also [I had a] house position, [so] I was still getting more residence life experience in a different capacity, which again was a plus to me. Knowing the education that I was going to get

and pairing that with the opportunity to actually practice the education was the most important things about that final decision in going there and was definitely an expectation that I had.

Micah felt that the numerous responsibilities and experiences he would obtain through his assistantship would build upon the skills he had already acquired in the field:

The actual assistantship piece, I was advising our Panhellenic council with another graduate student and then we worked with a professional staff member in that role, so we were attending all of the exec meetings, all of the council meetings, I had one-on-ones with the officers that I directly advised on a weekly basis and then along with that we also had...we were responsible for meeting with a certain number of chapters underneath us. So, I worked directly with 7 chapters, 5 Panhellenic and 2 IFC. One was a colony that was just starting up on campus again and the other one was the house that I lived with so, I was responsible for meeting with those individuals once a month to check in and see how things were going with their chapters, what are some things that our office or myself could help with, and third creating programming or planning for the upcoming semester, things along those lines. Then we also had any sort of larger scale programs our office was doing we were also responsible for helping out with those. So, I advised our Greek leadership team, they helped us a lot with the leadership programs through our office, I ran our emerging leaders retreat, which was an overnight retreat for up and coming student leaders in the Greek community. And then Greek

awards, which is our big awards things. My second year, myself and the other grads, were responsible for running that whole program, which is a pretty big endeavor. It was an \$8000 budget for the whole event with a pre-reception and the whole event itself and then the whole judging of the awards...it is a pretty big, formal deal on the campus.

Micah's interest in building on the skills he brought with him to the program shaped the courses that he took too, causing him to select courses he thought would be useful to his practice:

I really shaped and really tried to make it as practical as I could even though I definitely wanted to have the theoretical aspects to it. I really chose electives that I knew or think that I would potentially be practicing in the field and would be putting into use on a regular basis.

In fact, Micah's desire to take courses that he would be able to use led him to put together an independent study with a faculty member so that he could explore leadership development:

One of my big things is that the program from my perspective didn't really offer much on leadership development, and sort of what that looks like both theoretically and in practice, and I think we talked about it a lot in a very indirect way and I think that I was, okay how is this applied and how do we use this, but then a lot of the work that I was doing and I think that a lot of the other grads were doing was really directed around developing leaders as graduate students, so I think that was a gap that I personally saw and it was an interest that I had from where I was working previously where I did have

some hands on experience in working with leadership programs and then in working with our Greek leadership team and the emerging leaders program it was something that I saw as I need to learn more about this if I am going to be educating others about how this works and what this is, so that is really where the impetus came to create the independent study.

Even though Micah knew that he wanted to get a variety of experiences, and similar to the doubts he had concerning his continued interest in the program, Micah questioned if he was going to be able to handle the coursework. He found comfort when his coursework was easier than he anticipated:

I wasn't so worried about the assistantship position and other things and making that transition because I had been working previously, but I was nervous about how I was going to do on the school side of things. I mean I was a decent student. I was in no way a 4.0 student when I was in undergrad. So that was always a concern of mine. So, I was like am I really going to measure up to what I need to be doing? And so that transition ended up being a lot smoother than I initially thought it was going to be.

Again, Micah's lack of confidence in his own abilities is what led him to question if his previous experience as an undergraduate student prepared him for graduate school:

I think for me the biggest thing is that my undergraduate degree was in biochemistry and a lot of the work that I was doing was very much writing lab reports, this is what the fact is, these are what the facts are and this is what you are dealing with...very concrete answers, so I think it was knowing that I

was going into a field that was a little bit different. A little bit theoretical and not necessarily...and you know as long as I can support what I'm trying to say then that is what I'm trying to do and I need to try to find other research and stuff that is out there to support my views and so I think it was...I wasn't necessarily sure how that was going to work for me.

Micah was able to adjust to the academic requirements but not without being caught off guard by the amount of reading. Micah estimated that he spent 15 to 16 hours per week just reading for class. Part of what made the reading requirement startling for Micah was that he wanted to read it all and make sense of it for himself:

I knew that there was going to be a lot of reading, but not necessarily to the level that I thought and I was very committed to making sure that I read everything that I was supposed to and that I was assigned to read and I'm not the type of person to skim. I'm very much the type of person that I need to read everything and highlight, so it became time consuming, but at the same time it was something that I was committed to doing, so I made the time, and I made sure that I did it in a way that I made sure that I would be successful at the end of the day.

Micah knew the approach he needed to take in order to make sense of the readings on his own. Despite its being time consuming, Micah followed that approach.

Not Responsible for Others

Micah had an experience early on in his time in the program that challenged him to think about his responsibility to others around him:

I think one of the other things that was pretty significant during the first semester was that one of our classmates was arrested while we were there and there was a lot of sort of questioning about what happened with that situation. So I unfortunately, I was brought into it because all of this took place around the weekend that was my birthday so I was sort of brought into that in people thinking that I had some sort of a significant role in what took place. So that definitely created some strain in some relationships that I had with faculty members. Because I feel like I was looked at in an unfair perspective when I had no control over what eventually took place, but I was sort of pointed out as being the key person for everything that occurred over the course of that weekend. When in all reality I really had nothing to do with everything that was taking place. And so trying to explain that didn't really go over quite well. So, it sort of left a bad taste in my mouth as to why I was being accused of being responsible for all of these things happening, when really at the end of the day, I had nothing to do with any of it. It was just really a frustrating thing to be going through.

When asked if he was told that he was being blamed or where that understanding came from, Micah was able to point to what he felt was a surprise conversation that he was a part of that not everyone else was:

I was contacted by [a faculty member] about a month after the situation occurred and not really knowing what was going on because of the timing of it the faculty member sat me down because of the events that occurred that weekend and I was sort of taken back because I thought we were in a place

where it was over with and it was done, but apparently it wasn't. So you know, the conversations was sort of...again, you know it really caught me off guard, because you know he didn't really give me any context in what we would be talking about and you know...I thought it was something that had happened, it was done, and it was over with and then I was the only person outside of the individual to be confronted about the events that took place that weekend even though it wasn't held where I lived. The other person who was hosting the event there was not in conversation with him. I was asked if I understood third party liability of alcohol, which to me, it was sort of being implied to me that he was implying blame on me for providing alcohol for the event, which led to the student being arrested, and you know it was sort of one of those things that really turned me off at that point.

Micah also was aware of a lecture only the class he was in received:

In our [official name of class] course, they are the once a month class where we are with our faculty advisor. There was a...the one that month, it was stressed sort of about alcohol and things along those lines, and being graduate students and being held to a higher standard and things, but that wasn't equally communicated across all sections either. You know we talked about it in our section, but other students told us, and told myself, that they didn't have a similar conversation at all.

For Micah, this feeling of being blamed was very troublesome in that he knew he was not the only one at the original event, which meant to him that he was not responsible.

Micah seemed to recognize that others were in the wrong, but he did not appear to accept any personal responsibility for the incident himself:

I was named as being essentially the ringleader for the events that took place during the course of the weekend. I mean, there were other people who were there at this apartment who were on call, so obviously they were sober, for different area residence halls and different areas on campus. It was something that the individual's actions later on that evening that led to the arrest, not what was occurring at that point in time.

Micah saw no connection between the actions he and others participated in at his birthday party and his peer's arrest. Micah acknowledged that it was strange after the incident for him to be around the individual who was arrested, but maintained that he was not responsible for the choice of behavior that led to the arrest:

Well, it was definitely tough because the student...we had classes together beyond that, and so there was definitely some tension and you know, I felt like there was a piece of...you know I felt like I was being blamed by both the individual and certain faculty members of the department in that I had a responsibility into what happened with this individual. It really felt like I was being singled out in the situation and that it did have an adverse impact on some of the relationships that I ended up developing with faculty members, which I think is unfortunate. I didn't feel comfortable in...having future conversations. Did it take away from my experience? No, I mean I am still happy with everything that happened. I am comfortable with the classes that I

had taken. I don't think I ever avoided trying taking classes with a particular faculty member because of it.

Instead of considering the perspective of the faculty member he thought was accusing him, or the perspective of his peer that was arrested, Micah's solution to making sure that he did not find himself in experiences like this in the future was to distance himself from situations he disagreed with:

I think having a larger cohort it made it easier to you know differentiate from different people and certain things that I just wasn't necessarily down with, so I did that, and you know you still kept a casual acquaintances with people because [our cohort] was a small number when it comes down to it, you still have classes with each other, so I think you know you still keep some of those pieces there, but at the same time you...I just sort of try to dismiss myself from the other things taking place, and try to not be a part of it.

Change Within His Assistantship

While Micah was able to select which situations he became involved in with his peers, it was not as easy to navigate issues within his assistantship. Micah found it difficult that his assistantship was not providing as much stability as he would have liked:

It was just very difficult to deal with...there was a lot of transition in my assistantship. We went from an office with professional staff to not having a foundation was definitely trying at times. We went through a couple interim directors in my two years there, so it was hard to really figure out what direction are we heading in and then to be able to continue in that direction

because we were constantly changing, so I think that was really...it made things difficult. It definitely, when it came down to it, it had an impact on sort of the students working in that office and I think it led to a lot of disappointment for them because they were sold on something that didn't necessarily materialize while they were here.

Although Micah was disappointed in that there was not a consistent, clear direction set by a director for his office during his time in the preparation program, Micah took advantage of the opportunity it provided for him to propose some initiatives:

There were opportunities there and doors were opened because without a firm direction I was able to propose some things that maybe that wasn't exactly what our office was looking at, but I was able to move forward with some initiatives that we really weren't considering at the time and it was because there wasn't a firm direction or structure as to where we were heading. I mean I really just tried to take the assignments that I was given, the projects that I was given, and do them to the best of my ability and you know bring some innovation to what I was working on, and really focus on the pieces that I could control.

Part of Micah's ability to adjust to the changes within his assistantship was that he witnessed the changes taking place. By watching the changes take place, he could anticipate the frustrations they would cause from a variety of perspectives:

[The former director] took a job with his national office, in between my first year and second year, and it was just really frustrating because I was around working that summer in our conference programs, so I was still in residence

life, still on the same floor and I was still around seeing everything happen. It was just really, really frustrating because he was only there for a year. So for him to start putting some of these things into place and then to leave which really is no fault to him, I mean he needed to...the position he was offered is sort of a dream position really at his age, it was just really frustrating to make that transition and then to have a failed search and then not have anyone in place to have an interim director or a director's role and then to have 6 new grad students coming into our office on top of that. It was just a lot to sort of handle and transition.

Even though Micah could anticipate frustrations and prepare himself for the changes within his assistantship site office, he was frustrated that the institution allowed such change to occur:

It was sort of upsetting because we had a strong leader in charge of our office and we were going in a very positive direction and then you know for that to sort of be taken away it was just really frustrating. Being in the office over the summer while this was all sort of happening too, didn't really help.

Because you know I was seeing, knowing that he wasn't going to be here and having a lot of new graduate students coming into our office the next year who were thinking that he was going to be in charge of our office, that really set up an odd dynamic. Some of them openly admitted that he was the selling point for them to come here and his decision is what sold them on wanting to work in our office, and for them to then come and see that he's not here, and there is sort of that void in leadership, definitely set things up on the wrong

foot, and I think that led to a lot of the issues that we were experiencing in my second year. Transitioning six new grads. and not having that direction was really trying and it took a long time to sort of get us back to where we needed to be and running. It was just one of those things where I think that the University could have really...they let someone go who they shouldn't have let go, and you know he was definitely offered a great opportunity and I don't blame him, but I think the, I feel like the University had a chance to lock someone in who would have really helped them in the long run. I mean he was an alum of the institution, he understands how things work, he had been there for years...he was really setting up a strong foundation for a really positive future.

Micah felt strongly that the University should have tried to keep his director, and that the vision his director had for the office was needed. Although Micah was disappointed with the change his office was experiencing, he was able to see a difference between how he and the other graduate students handled the changes in the office:

I thought that how people handled that transition was very disappointing and how grad students felt that they knew better than professional staff members who had been working in these positions or had experience for years, and many GAs were coming right out of undergrad. And the issue was that I think they didn't really know how to express their opinions, so they went about it in what I would definitely say is inappropriate you know? They didn't get the answer that they necessarily wanted from one of our staff members, so then

they tried to go over top their heads until they got to a person who eventually said yes. To me that was just one of those things where I just did what I could with them but at the same time you know I let my supervisors know that I didn't feel the same way. I just tried to continue doing what I knew needed to be done and to do the work that I knew needed to be accomplished. It definitely created some sections in our office, which were uneasy. It created...it was not necessarily a hostile work environment but it was definitely tension in the office any time that we were there because a certain group felt one way and another group felt another way. It was just really frustrating to have that division. You know you learn to work through it. We got done what we needed to get done at the end of the day. Certain things went really well and certain things didn't, and I think that was what the expectation could be at the end of the day. With so much change taking place it is impossible for everything to be 100% it is just not going to work out that way.

Micah wondered if the difference he noticed between himself and his peers was attributable to his working prior to attending graduate school and his longer history in the office. Although he did not agree with his peers going to different staff members until they found someone to say yes, he, at first, responded by trying to focus on completing his responsibilities. Eventually, Micah decided to try to reach out to his peers and help them understand how they could professionally approach their frustrations with the changes in the office:

That second semester we had an interim director from another office on campus who shifted over and that caused some issues. Just that the graduate students didn't really mesh with his particular supervisory style and so in that process they, instead of having conversations with him directly about it, they decided that it was better to go to his supervisor and bring up those issues. I tried to have them understand that they need to be bringing it to him first because if they go directly his supervisor more than likely his supervisor is going to ask him have you talked with him directly about it and then the other piece too, is you know you need to provide him with the professional courtesy that if you go over his head to his supervisor and then his supervisor confronts him on it, how is he going to know what you are going to be talking about if you have never engaged him in this conversation first. Their response was pretty much well, he isn't going to listen to us, he doesn't care. You don't know that until you talk to him about that.

Micah tried to reach out to the other graduate students in the office and help them understand why they should first approach the interim director before going to the interim director's supervisor. Although his peers decided that talking to the interim director was not worth their time, Micah, staying true to his advice, approached him when he had concerns:

Luckily I had a pretty good relationship with him previously until he made the move to our office and so sometimes there were pieces of his style that I didn't jive with either, but I knew that I could talk to him about it and we could sit down and he would engage me in conversation about those things

and at the end of the day we could leave the office, and we might still disagree, but we know that we are on the same page, and he will give me an explanation as to why things are the way that they are and that is fine, as long as I have that understanding then I am cool with that. But they just seemed hesitant to be able to go to him directly because they just felt like it wasn't going to change anyway and they wanted to go to the next level. I also have an obligation to him, and I am going to let him know what is happening so that he is not completely blindsided by it, and then after everything was done, I felt I also had an obligation to talk to, after talking with my direct supervisor, to his supervisor to let him know that some of the things that he may be hearing is not the experience of everyone in that office because I don't want his views to be tainted based on information that is only coming from one side.

Micah was aware that his relationship with the interim director was a contributing factor in his belief that the first step when addressing an issue about the interim director's style was to go to the interim director and talk to him about it. However, Micah also felt an obligation, despite the relationship, to go to both the interim director and the interim director's supervisor to make sure that they knew he did not agree with his peers and their behavior.

Confronting Peers

Micah's inability to get his peers to adopt what he believed was the professional approach to the situation continued to weigh on Micah's mind. Micah identified this challenge as a struggle he has in confronting his peers:

I would say one of the things that definitely still is challenging is being able to confront your peers. I think it is one of the things that is definitely challenging because we see a lot of things that we don't necessarily agree with or we think are right but how do you tell someone who is your equal that that is just not cool and do it in a way in that you are not challenging necessarily them personally you are challenging sort of the behavior that you are seeing, that you are witnessing. You have to like, you are looking out for them in the long run, but are they really going to take it that way? That you are really looking out for their best interest and I really think that was something that was challenging especially that second year when there was only two returning grad students, so we had 6 new grads, and we had a new professional staff member, and we didn't have a director, so there was a lot of ambiguity as to what was going on. So, I think that there was a lot of opportunities and at times, I took advantage of them, and at other times I sort of let it go and looking back I wish I would have stepped back and taken the opportunity and said more of what was on my mind and trying to help them and have them seeing me trying to help them. It is not about it being combative or that I know all because I don't and I fully admit that. But there are certain things that to me they were doing I would hope that they would have the feeling that maybe this isn't the right thing or maybe I should be going about this in a different way and I just don't know that is the case. I think missing out on some of those opportunities was definitely sort of a disappointment and challenge because there was a lot of times that I had the

opportunity not just with the students, but also with the staff in my office and some of the decisions that they made and I'm sure people felt the same thing about me and some of the things that I was doing, so you know it was just very hard to you know, challenge your own peers. How do you confront them in a way that is productive and constructive without them taking it personally?

For Micah, the struggle was with knowing how to confront his peers so that his peers would hear it in such a way that they would reconsider the choices they were making. Micah was aware that he could have spoken up more, and felt that he should have, but still was unclear exactly how he would have done so in a way that was not met with resistance:

I think the hardest thing is that you want to help someone and I think that is the intention of that, but at the same time you are criticizing something they are doing, but how do you criticize them without them taking it personally because they are your peer? And that was just difficult at times, and you know we had some individuals and they felt that they were doing the right thing and then when you are confronting them and they feel like they are doing the right thing on top of it, it becomes very...sometimes people can become very defensive. So that was sort of the struggle with that. How do I present it in a way that they understand that I am trying to help them? I am not attacking them personally, I am just trying to say that maybe there is a better way in the future to go about handling some of these things that they are facing and you know I think that was the piece that made it difficult because

you can only do it so many times until you get to the point where they are not either hearing it or is it really worth it anymore.

Micah struggled to understand how he could approach others about choices they were making without causing them to become defensive. Micah no longer wanted to take the approach he took when his peer was arrested, which was to distance himself so as not to be involved in any future situations. Instead of distancing himself, Micah felt a responsibility to others around him:

When I first heard the direction that the students were going with [their complaints about the interim director] I sort of had the knee jerk reaction like what the hell are they doing? This is ridiculous. This is not going to be good for them and this is something they need to learn sooner rather than later when they are professionals and they have hurt themselves in the long run because they decided to go about it in the way that they are doing it now. And the other thing that sort of helps is that there was a...one of the newer grads, him and I were really close, I mean he is the one that sort of brought this whole situation to my attention initially because they wanted...they came to him about it and asked his opinion and he didn't really know what to do because he didn't feel the same way that they did but he felt like he was being lumped into it with them. So we talked about it a little bit first and then we decided that you know, I would talk with the other grads and let them know that this really isn't the way to go about doing this.

Knowing that he would be graduating, and would therefore not have to deal with the ramifications of the other graduate students' being upset, made it easier for Micah to

get involved in the situation. He was able to see that the graduate student who came to him and told him about what was going on was not going to have the luxury of graduation, and felt bad for him:

I was leaving at the end of the year, so you know for me, I'm just looking out for them, while he still has to maintain a working relationship with them as the year, as the next year progresses, so you know we talked about it and he was comfortable with me sort of approaching them with it, and it really sort of...it sucked because he was really put in between a rock and a hard place and he didn't feel the same way as they did, but he was the only one out of the group that didn't feel that way, so then for him to have to come back next year and continue to work with them, you know, he didn't want it to be...he didn't want to have that tension there. But at the end of the day, you sort of still did. The other grads did what they felt was best and you know he was able to; he talked with our direct supervisor and let him know that he agrees with some things but that there were other things that he doesn't agree with. He wasn't completely on board with what they were saying because that was not the case. He was just you know, it wasn't easy to confront them at the end of the day, to tell them, really what I felt that what they were doing was wrong, and to sort of put it bluntly like that, you know I don't want to turn them off from ever wanting to come to me in the future about something, but providing them that perspective that maybe there is a better way to be doing this.

Micah felt bad for the first year graduate student who also did not agree with the other graduate students because he anticipated that it would create tension between him and

the other graduate students. Micah understood though that doing what one believed was right sometimes meant disagreeing with others.

Understanding His Responsibility to Others

Undergraduate students started coming to Micah during his second year, and Micah became a mentor to many. These relationships were meaningful to him:

I have students that see me as a mentor and they ask me questions and they are grad students now in student affairs, so I think to me that is the biggest impact that I had and what makes me the most proud is seeing them in these positions and knowing that through our conversations that it helped guide them and they are happy to be where they are and just being able to continue to do that would only make me more proud as I continue my career.

I would say for the students that asked me to be their mentor I think that is a big thing, and I try to tell students you can have someone in that mindset but until you are able to ask them that question they don't necessarily know that that is the role that they are serving for you, so I mean, these students that came out asked me if I could serve in that [mentor] role for them. So we all talk even though a couple of them are still at [name of institution] a couple of them are in different grad programs across the nation, so pretty much any time that there is an issue that they are dealing with and they are just not sure they usually give me a call and send me a message or ask me about it and just try to process through you know, and have them work through the situation themselves through our conversation and help guide them in those ways. I think that is sort of how I look at that mentor relationship. There is still a

personal aspect to it, but it is still focused on what they are doing either in the field or still in their position as undergrad students. I am just hoping to give them some of that outside...since I am not there with them first hand, to give them that perspective.

Micah encouraged the undergraduate students he worked with to formalize the relationships they had with others who they considered to be mentors by formally asking them to serve in that role. Micah himself was asked by several students, a few who are now in student affairs preparation programs, to serve as a mentor, and he takes that responsibility seriously by helping his mentees process through their issues.

Another way that Micah came to understand and establish his belief about his responsibility toward others involved an African-American male graduate student friend:

I would say that one of the guys that was in the cohort ahead of me and we had a class together and we were in the same assistantship and I think for me just becoming friends with him, I mean he was an African-American male and being in the Midwest in [name of town] and not having many non-White students in our program, he was from the South, so he was definitely coming with a very different perspective, so some of the frustration and struggles that he had there, opened my eyes up to, there is a lot of other people who are experiencing the same thing that he is currently here at this school. Then I had the opportunity to work with some students who were in our NPHC chapters on a more individual and personal level, and it seemed like they were experiencing some of the same things too and how...what was I doing in my

work to help be more inclusive to those students? And they...when I first started I wasn't very much really thinking about that. I was very task oriented what do I need to do to get these things done today, so becoming closer friends with [name of African-American male] and sort of working with him and some of the students a bit more, I really realized that I am totally shutting out a population even though I am not doing it intentionally. I am doing it every day in the language that I use when I work with Greek organizations. It is very different when I work with NPHC groups so how can I be more inclusive in that way. You know, I understand that I might not work with them directly on a daily basis, but I do care about their experience and I want to make sure that I am being inviting to them, that they know they can come and talk with me about some of the things that they are going through because they don't necessarily always have that outlet.

Through his interactions with his African-American friend, and then through the interactions he had with the students involved in NPHC organizations, Micah learned how, through his practice, he was excluding those who were not members of the predominately-White Greek organizations with which he primarily worked. He has since adjusted his practice to be more supportive and inclusive of all Greek organizations, viewing it as a responsibility he has, even though he does not work with them on a daily basis.

Through the various experiences that he had while in the student affairs preparation program, Micah now considers the perspective of others and how they might be hearing things or what their experiences might be. He is aware that in order

for the learning that he wants to occur he might have to adjust his approach in order to connect to different people. Micah no longer resists feedback, like he did when he was being approached about the incident involving his peer's arrest, but views feedback as an opportunity to reflect on who he is and the approach he is taking:

Everyone is a little different in how you want to communicate and relate to them and I think each person needs to think about their own individual style because there isn't necessarily one cookie cutter way to relate to others and I think people...I think people take in information differently and so just being aware that what I might be communicating might not necessarily be resonating with someone, so I might have to do that a little bit differently. I think it is one of those things that it is a process and I don't...I think initially you think you have the best way and then you slowly find out that what you think is the best way might not be the best way so being open to changing how you are doing that and actually taking feedback and criticism and reflecting on that and trying to make some change based on that is definitely important in relating to others because if you keep trying to do it the same way you are doing it and it isn't working it is not...eventually there isn't going to be an epiphany and then all of the sudden it is going to work it is really being able to adapt a little bit and change and knowing that for each person you are probably going to have to do that a little bit and that you are probably going to have to do that for each individual that you are working with.

Micah recognized that he must be willing to put in the work and take on the responsibility to build the connection with others in order to maintain a practice congruent with his belief in inclusivity:

I am at a school on the West coast but it is still a predominately White institution where I am working at and so I oversee student organizations, and so we have culturally based and religiously based student organizations that don't necessarily have the support on our campus that they need, so trying to make sure that some of the things that they are doing, and that we are just starting to explore bringing the NPHC Greek organizations to our campus and what that looks like, and so opening up our campus to that and having some of those conversations...you know I do care and I'm wanting them to have that experience and I'm willing to make it happen for them and so we had some special interest meetings, or an interest meeting, to see who was really looking at going for it and I think some of the students have a bad taste in their mouth with some of the previous experiences that they have had here, so it is sort of an uphill battle, to understand that I do care, and I know why it is important, and I value it because I have seen it at another institution that is somewhat similar to the one that I am at now, and I know what it meant to those students. For many of them they wouldn't have stayed at [name of institution] if it wasn't for membership in their organization and then so, I want for students here with that same experience, to have that opportunity.

Micah described further the perspective that he has now due to his student affairs preparation program experience:

Well, it has definitely given me a lot of perspective on sort of who I am as a professional and sort of the work that I am doing now and what I'm trying to accomplish I mean both the positive and the negative experiences I had in the program all of them. I tried my best to take lessons and educational moments from those opportunities and you know learn from each little piece and you know whether it is something I am going to apply in practice or whether it is something I know that I don't want to do as a professional...so really trying to take every little thing that I can and learn from it both in the classroom and outside of the classroom and really trying to make myself a better professional from those experiences. So, I think it...so at this point I feel confident that it has been working out well and you know I think it is always going to be something I am going to be learning and growing and trying to be a better professional, so I think that every experience I have is going to contribute to that in some way and definitely there were some really good highs and some really low lows while I was at [name of prep program] and I think every one of those opportunities and examples, I have tried to take a little piece from each one and use that or know that I wouldn't use that in the future, so there are examples that come up in my job now where luckily I have had a similar...somewhat similar experience previously that I can sort of draw on and how I approached that in the past and how I want more forward with it now, so it works out well.

Micah is connecting his new experiences in his current position to his past experiences, which makes him value his past experiences, whether positive or

negative, and learn from them. Micah is also aware that he does not really have a complete picture if he just looks at things from his point of view, and that by understanding others' perspectives he is learning more about himself:

I was opened to new perspectives. Just I mean, we are bringing a group of people together who had very different personal and life experiences and different undergraduate experiences and some had work experiences coming into it and when you plant all of that together in a class setting or in an assistantship, there is definitely going to be learning about each other, but also about yourself. So that was definitely there it was, you know it, yeah, I guess I mean I don't really know how else to put it, but you know I learned a lot about myself while I was there, and I learned a lot about other people I feel like I try to look at things and use multiple lenses in my professional experience and know that my own personal...my own perspective is not providing a full picture, so I try to take that in the work that I do now and make sure that I'm being inclusive of anyone's particular experience and their perspective.

Responsibility to Others

Micah received assistance from his mentor when selecting a student affairs preparation program, which provided him an opportunity to ask questions and consider his own interests, something he acknowledged he probably would not have done on his own. In addition to help from his mentor, Micah selected the preparation program that he did after visiting the program, as well as learning more about the cohort model. Despite all of his research, Micah worried about the choice he was

making to obtain his master's degree and his abilities to handle the coursework. When these worries turned out to be false, Micah was pleasantly surprised. A strategy Micah adopted as he navigated his way through the program was to seek out practical experiences and courses that would also allow him to ground his practice in theory. A significant experience for Micah occurred with the arrest of one of his peers after which Micah felt strongly that he was being accused of instigating the behavior. Adamantly believing that he had no part in causing the arrest, yet uncertain as to what that meant for his interactions with others, Micah chose to distance himself from some of his peers, so as not to be involved in any controversy. Soon, however, Micah was experiencing a situation within his assistantship to which he was asked and felt obligated to participate. By this time, Micah had developed a sense of responsibility to others around him, and took steps to fulfill that responsibility knowing that it might cause others to be upset with him. Micah brought that same sense of responsibility to the mentor relationships he had, as well as to his practice in an effort to be more inclusive. By the time Micah graduated, he recognized that he was still learning, and of the many points he was learning one of them was how to confront his peers without his peers taking his feedback personally.

Brandon

Brandon was born, raised, and went to undergraduate school in the South. He began his time in undergraduate school majoring in music, but then realized he did not want to be a "starving artist," so changed to computer science. He described his decision to go into computer science as "more logical." Unfortunately, computer science did not satisfy him either: "Then I did computer science and absolutely hated

it.” Brandon shared that what he did not like about computer science was the “social environment” and that he felt like an “outsider.” At the same time that he was feeling this way in the classroom, Brandon began getting involved with student organizations. Specifically, Brandon joined a fraternity and student government. It was through his participation in such activities that Brandon found himself wishing he could, “do this as a job” and through a conversation with the Dean of Students, Brandon realized he could by going into student affairs, but that he would have to get his master’s degree first:

All of the sudden I said to myself that thing that everyone says to themselves, I wish I could do this as a job and the Dean of Students actually said you can. The Dean pointed out some programs for me and so from there I looked at [name of student affairs preparation program], [name of prep program], and [name of prep program] and some other top universities.

Brandon’s decision to make this his career came from his experiences as an undergraduate student leader where enjoyed working with a variety of student affairs offices:

What attracted me to this job more then anything was the position of, I told you that I was in a student government position, my senior year and what attracted me was working with different offices. I didn’t know that these offices really existed in residence life, when I was in residence life; I was solely in residence life. I mean, I might have had to coordinate something with dining services, or talk to the director for the student union, but I really didn’t know that these other offices existed. I thought, you know I don’t

really know what I thought, I kind of thought that fraternities and sororities popped out of thin air, they managed themselves. The same for student government, student government just really managed themselves there was no...I didn't really understand how the dean's office worked. I didn't even know that there was a vice president for student affairs. So, working in student government opened my eyes to different offices that supported students and that was something that I really loved. I loved the fact that I got to work with student life for homecoming, I got to coordinate things with the director of Greek life...it was just great.

Brandon applied to three student affairs preparation programs in the fall of his senior year. Of the three programs that Brandon applied to, his Dean specifically recommended two of them. The third he found on his own. All three of the programs that Brandon applied to were in the Midwest. Having grown up in the South, Brandon was not sure why he looked at graduate programs in the Midwest. Despite the two program recommendations from the Dean being in the Midwest, he just knew that he wanted to, "see what was out there":

For some reason I was actually very interested in looking in the Midwest. I really don't know why now that I look back on it. I think I just wanted to get out of the South and see what was out there, I guess, above the Mason Dixon line.

In terms of finding a program to attend, familiarity was important to Brandon. Brandon wanted to find a place where he could continue to have similar experiences to those he had as an undergraduate student when he was involved in student

organizations, as well as be within, “maybe stay within two hours of a major city if the grad school is in a small area”:

I definitely wanted access to airports because I knew that I was going to be very far away from home...ten hours usually. I also wanted...some familiarity from home. I am from [name of city and state] originally, lived and stayed there, born and raised 18 years and that is a lot of time in a major city. And [name of city] is maybe 2 million at this point, so fairly large city, it is the largest one in [name of state], so I am very much a city boy. And so, I wanted that experience, I didn't want a drastic change, and so I knew that this town I was in would be drastic, but at least I wanted a place where I could get in my car and drive to a city and enjoy some part of it.

Familiarity was comforting to Brandon if he was going to be some place new. This familiarity took the form of access to a city, which Brandon knew would provide him easy access to an airport in order to go home.

Brandon was invited to interview at two of the three institutions he applied to, and when asked about his decision to attend the program that he did, Brandon articulated that several factors contributed to his decision. First, Brandon was attracted to the theory to practice balance:

I really enjoyed [name of student affairs preparation program]'s I guess theoretical part of their program, as well as the practical part. I think a lot of programs looked at too much emphasis on theory or not enough emphasis on practicality. So, I liked [name of student affairs preparation program]'s kind of 50/50 practicality and theory part of their program.

Second, Brandon liked the faculty:

I also really liked the faculty members. They were very nice. There were very few of the faculty members throughout the entire process at other grad schools where I feel like they were just glad to have me there. Where at a lot of other schools, especially [name of student affairs preparation program], I felt as though I should be glad to be in their presence. And so [name of student affairs preparation program] was a complete departure from that, you know, that very...this is the Wizard of Oz kind of thing where you should be glad to be here and not the other way around.

...then the faculty, we had a lot of well-known faculty, especially [name of faculty member], so it was nice to study, or so it was nice to want to study under someone like that.

Third, Brandon was looking for a large cohort, and the program he selected provided that:

...the cohort sizes were large, and I actually love a large setting where there are different people and so it was very diverse...

To me large is [size of cohort]. I loved that size. You just get different experiences and you get to talk to people from different areas. I also like the fact, and I think I mentioned this at first, [name of institution] is not so much regional. A lot of different programs are very regional where somebody is from you know an hour to two mile radius. [Name of institution] is kind of in, what I call boon town, so there was no way it could be regional because most people don't know that it exists until you are looking for programs. But, I...I

really liked the size of it just because I got a lot of different experiences and I got to talk to a lot of different people and now I know people from [name of state], [name of state], [name of country], you know I have a very good friend who actually came here from [name of city] to go to the program and now he is married to one of the girls in the program and they are living in [name of state].

Fourth, Brandon appreciated the assistantship requirement:

Also, the assistantship was a big part of [his program selection decision]. At [name of student affairs preparation program] you have to have an assistantship in order to go to [name of student affairs preparation program]. You can get accepted by the school, but if you don't get an assistantship then you are not going to [name of student affairs preparation program]. I chose it based on that, as well, because the assistantships were very strong. At other schools it felt like the assistantships were weak and you were doing assessments and survey monkey's. You were doing a lot of things that you could...honestly, and not to sound like a snob or anything, and not to devalue student assistants, and undergrads, a lot of things that student assistants do that the grad students were going to do. So, I was really disappointed in some of the other institutions and how they handled their assistantships. [Name of student affairs preparation program] was the only one that, other than [name of student affairs preparation program], that had really good assistantships, so [name of student affairs preparation program] had great assistantships. It felt

like you were kind of like a staff member as a graduate student, so I also picked [name of student affairs preparation program] based on that.

Although Brandon's decision to attend the program he did appeared to be based on characteristics of the program, itself, further discussion about the two programs he did not choose revealed less tangible factors regarding his selection. More specifically, one of the institutions lost his application four times, and to Brandon that was a "sign" that he should not be there. Despite Brandon's being treated poorly by that program, he continued to convey a high level of regard for it. Brandon justified his regard for the program because of those he knows who have graduated from that program without significant acknowledgement of his own treatment. He also was finally admitted into the program:

[Name of student affairs preparation program] was very different because when I applied to [name of student affairs preparation program], I am also a believer in signs, and [name of student affairs preparation program] was literally the first program that I heard of. It was kind of a superstar program in higher ed and they kept losing my application. And you know I didn't hold it necessarily against the program because the program was great, because you know I know a lot of people that went to that program and they have turned out to be wonderful professionals and you know some superstar professors there but they kept losing my application. At that point I just decided to not pursue it anymore because the fourth time was enough. At that point I had to pay the GRE company to send it in, so really I never technically interviewed there. I actually got accepted by the school, which was really odd, in March

without interviewing, but I still needed to search for an assistantship there because there I think you can go there without getting an assistantship. And so that is my understanding. You can go to [name of student affairs preparation program] without having a fulltime assistantship or you had to search for your own.

Brandon did have an on-campus interview at the other graduate program he chose not to attend. Similar to the preparation program Brandon chose, the program required an assistantship, and had well-known faculty members. Both components of a preparation program Brandon thought were necessary. Yet, Brandon chose not to select this program because he “got the feeling” he would only be studying theory the entire time:

[Name of student affairs preparation program] was a similar situation as [name of student affairs preparation program] in that I did interview at [name of student affairs preparation program], and you had to have an assistantship at [name of student affairs preparation program] to go there. At [name of student affairs preparation program], I think the only thing that they were also the ones that were more academic focused, more theory focused. They have [name of faculty member] there, as you know, and really I kind of got a feeling that you were going to be studying theory the entire time and while I love theory I didn't want to have it as my executive summary for the next two years of my graduate career, so I decided to go elsewhere.

The balance between theory and practice was important to Brandon. When asked further about it, Brandon shared how he came to understand that there was such a balance within the program:

Right, I definitely felt like when I was at [name of student affairs preparation program], in speaking with the faculty members, they have a faculty panel when you first get there. I think it is the first or second night and some of the faculty members speak to you and talk to you. They actually try to bring in a lot of their practical experience.

Faculty with practical experience was very important to Brandon, and seemed to help him be able to relate to the theory he was learning in the classroom:

One thing that I recommend that a lot of future graduate students in student affairs do is look at the roster of faculty members. I am a big stickler of a faculty member not being a faculty member since they started. I don't hold that against them. I literally work well with a faculty member who can tell me well this is what I did as my first year as a residence director or this is what I did when I was working in student activities. I think that that in some ways it is essential to be a professor or teach in this field because you have to have some experience. I love [name of faculty member], more than the next person, but the one thing that I struggled with, he's a faculty member at [name of student affairs preparation program], is that he literally graduated from I think [name of student affairs preparation program] with his PhD and he has been teaching for [awhile] and he has some great experiences and he's on the board of trustees on a number of college boards, however he has never

technically had the practical experience in the field. So he has always been a professor, he has always viewed things from an academic side and [name of student affairs preparation program] is great because he's one of the very few and all of the rest of the professors have had some sort of experience working in the field...They wouldn't just talk about theory and make it very academic "pie in the sky" kind of theory that we all know and love, but they would bring it home for us and they would say well when you advise this student what level of Chickering and Reisser's vectors is this student at. That is what I like and what I really enjoyed because I wanted to mix the practical with theoretical experience.

The mix or balance that Brandon desired between theory and practice did not refer to how he would be spending his time in the program, rather it referred to how he was learning new information in the classroom. Having faculty with practical experience allowed Brandon to connect better to theory, which otherwise seemed very "pie in the sky" to him. The separation in terms of time between when Brandon learned about theory and when he interacted with the students and would be using the theory, which was based on course scheduling and program requirements, was also something that Brandon identified as helpful:

So, we started school in June and we started student development and basically had a class about the history of student affairs higher education and those classes were pretty good, what was different then our experience, from our on campus people that started in the fall, is that we started without students, and so it was a great way to give a perspective of how to talk about

student development theory without having students that you are working with in your assistantship. So, it was much more of a preparation thing for us to know about our theory and what we are going to do, and how we are going to let theory inform practice, and practice inform theory and things of that nature, and so we got both kind of perspectives, especially when starting school, we already knew it, we already had it...kind of advanced knowledge about theory, so really the perspective, more so than anything, about how theory works, how we learned about theory, student development without having students, and then having students when we already had that class and then were in more advanced level classes with our fall semester with our students, that was really something that connected with me because I thought that was a unique experience, and a lot of people don't get that.

Despite the practical knowledge Brandon obtained through his experiences as an undergraduate, Brandon was still caught off guard in terms of what he expected the program to be like:

When I first started [name of student affairs preparation program] I definitely expected the experience to be all you know rainbows and butterflies I guess. I was, you know I am very optimistic and I guess that is a good thing and a bad thing and I think I expected it to be very easy. Because I thought to myself I was good at being a student leader in undergrad, I'm good at articulating myself, I'm good at talking to people so you know this career, this graduate career of mine should be really simple and it was everything but. I loved my experience there but it was definitely challenging.

Groupthink

To Brandon, his success as an undergraduate student within student affairs should have easily translated to his success in graduate school. Brandon discovered it was not that easy. Brandon was able to see that the way he thought while he was an undergraduate student, “groupthink,” was a part of the problem for him in graduate school. In graduate school, there was no one person that Brandon could follow to learn how to make it through the program. Brandon described the groupthink way of thinking he learned as an undergraduate as:

I just assumed that if you were in that position [a leadership position], it was the big A authority thing...if you were in that position you would know what you are talking about, and you know what you are supposed to be doing then you are going to be right, then there is no you know there is no wrong.

Nobody is going to lead you astray, nobody is going to make a major mistake, nobody is going to come back and say oh. It was just the way that it was.

For Brandon there was a right way and a wrong way as an undergraduate student and he brought this way of thinking with him to the graduate program:

I think before I was very dependent on a lot of my friends' opinions of me. Just a groupthink mentality again. You know I would look in my closet, and this is very menial but something very big about who I am today, you know I would look in my closet and think you know what can I wear and what shouldn't I wear. It was something that I was like okay now, and this may seem like a small thing, but if it is in my closet I am going to wear it if I can fit it. I shouldn't be thinking about if a fraternity brother would like or hate

this coat. It had gotten to that point and I think that a lot of people always assume that sorority women have the drama and have to dress a certain way for their sisters to like them or not give them a hard time. I would say the fraternity is no different.... something as little as that, you know every time I think in the back of my head there is this little voice that says will they say something about this coat? Gosh you know for years I would not wear a leather coat because it was just the uncool thing to do and while that is something that is very superficial it is something that is really deep in my psyche that I thought about...things like that.

Brandon blamed his “groupthink” problem primarily on the attention he received as a student leader. This student leader identity was at the forefront of his experience as an undergraduate student and in graduate school he was challenged to step out of this identity and take on a different role:

One of the things that I think is the difference, and I am in an IFC fraternity, not a NPHC fraternity, and I say that to say that the thing that challenged me the most about that is that NPHC grooms alumni. They really groom the best alumni members ever and I think that their program is amazing. IFC and Panhel, or PC as some people call them, they groom the best undergraduate members ever, but once we graduate we are ready to go into a little mini retirement. By now a lot of people, there are only a few people left in the fraternity that know me but, that is not the case with NPHC. And I say that to say that was a challenge for me. To be on the outside, to be one of the old guys, be one of the old crew that is now looking in and thinking okay this is

the way that things used to be and all of that. So that was difficult for me to find a new identity and I didn't necessarily just identify with my fraternity, I identified with being a student leader, and so now the spotlight has always been on me for those four, three to four years, while I was a student leader and now I have to put that spotlight on other students and I'm no longer the start of the show. I'm now the supporting cast.

Brandon was aware while in graduate school that he had experienced groupthink as an undergraduate, and tried to move himself out of groupthink. Brandon knew that, although difficult, he needed to make such a change in order to join or be a part of the group in his master's program:

I knew that I was probably in a bit of a groupthink situation, but by the time that I graduated [from undergraduate school] or when I was graduating I thought oh you know this will dissipate, this happens, or you know so whatever. I realized that when I was in graduate school that I was still in that mindset because I was still calling home a lot, I was still calling my friends, I was still trying to figure out you know what was this, what do we think about this, it was almost a we thing, but you know it was a "we" as in a group of people and so it was very different to no longer be in the groupthink because once you graduated you graduated.

That was something that was really difficult for me. It was really...the support roles from undergrad and from home were dissipating and the gap between what people understood that I was going through at home just grew,

exponentially. So, I had to develop a support system in graduate school. I had to or I would not have survived.

Although Brandon saw the need to no longer see himself as a part of a “we,” transitioning out of groupthink was not that simple. For example, Brandon identified one of the biggest surprises for him that just because [name of institution] had a leading student affairs preparation program it did not translate into an amazing student affairs division:

[Name of student affairs preparation program] is a great school, it has a wonderful program, however the student affairs office at [name of institution] is not the greatest. I think there are a lot of kinks to be worked out in their student affairs office. A lot of things shocked me and surprised me in how backwards things can be there. I think there are some great people that work there. I think the Vice President is wonderful, I know him and he is an amazing person, I just think that there are some kinks to work out in the student affairs department to where we are one of the leading programs, but we don't have one of the leading student affairs offices, and a lot of people think that we do...I think that was a shocker for me to think wait a minute there are other schools around us that are so much better then this, you know student affairs-wise, you know in the office of student affairs and yet, with such a great program, I think that was a shock for me.

Although Brandon was attending the student affairs preparation program at [name of institution], his assistantship was not at that institution, so he was not a part of the division of student affairs, yet he thought about the division in terms of “we.” When

asked for more specifics about how Brandon was coming to the conclusion that the student affairs division did not have its act together, Brandon spoke about the Office of Residence Life. Again, Brandon spoke as though he was a member of that office, even though he was not and was acquiring the information he used to form his opinion from his peers:

As great as it can be, and as wonderful as those people can be...Residence Life, I think the communication there and really just in student affairs is not great. There has been a lot of times where a lot of us have gotten emails, or people have gotten emails, and it has just been a day before this is what needs to happen now and we are like wait a minute we don't even have time to process this, we don't even have time to tell our RAs.

Brandon did not consider that perhaps he did not know all of the information. To him, obtaining the information from his friends who worked in the Office of Residence Life made it fact and therefore he adopted their same opinion, yet presented it as though it was his own.

Groupthink Challenged Through Experiences With Others

Although outward appearances were important to Brandon in terms of style and clothing, they did not extend to race. Brandon's way of valuing outward appearances was reinforced through groupthink and the attention he received as an undergraduate. He was shocked when he did not connect with an African-American professor in the program. Outwardly Brandon and this faculty member looked like they should connect, and while Brandon was aware that they were the same race, he

seemed unprepared for there to be differences between himself and the professor because of their race:

The professors that I was going to gravitate to, of course I am African-American, you know and I'm like oh wow there [are] African-American [people] on the staff, or the faculty, and I'm going to gravitate toward [them] because [they] know how it is or how it feels to be you know African-American in a place where [you are] the minority. So, I felt that I was going to gravitate toward [them], and I did not and we actually didn't, you know, I wouldn't say get along, but we actually didn't click as much as I thought we would. We didn't have a great relationship. I didn't feel comfortable going to [them]. I didn't feel...I don't know...I didn't feel a connection. I didn't feel, you know, [their] emails were...when it came to me [their] emails were a little harsh, and the email could be about something very little and [they] would get defensive easily with me. So, I think it was personal. I just think we weren't going to get along necessarily. I think [their] philosophy about being African-American and mine were very different and so I think that was the key. So, that was very shocking to me and that was kind of disappointing to me.

Brandon's inability to connect with a faculty member that racially looked like him was hard for Brandon to understand, and led Brandon to question the groupthink method he was using to define who he was:

There was a different perspective for me as an African-American male I think I had a very different perspective about a few things even different from my culture and my ethnic group, I think coming in, and I think this was kind of

the dissonance between me and an African-American professor...I've had a, I had just a different perspective than [he/she] did about being black and that is the honest to God truth. I just think that you know, it is something that is absolutely the forefront of my character, that is absolutely the forefront of my experience but it does not dominate the entire personality of myself, it is not something that I decry. Hopefully if people see me they realize it, but it is not something that is just chief among my personality traits, and I think that...that seeing the perspective of the African-American perspective that I had, which it was...it was absolutely a huge part, I mean it was so much a huge part, it was so much what [the professor] seemed to focus on first, that was different, that was different for me, it kind of made me stop and thinking, oh my gosh, am I not focusing in on it enough? Am I focusing on it too much? What is different here, so I think that was something that kind of made me stop and think.

To Brandon's surprise, he found a connection with a faculty member who was not of the same racial background:

What was different was that I actually found a white male who was my mentor and that wasn't different because throughout my college collegiate career I had white males or white females as my mentors or whatever, but I ended up gravitating toward someone who absolutely had no idea, and who was very open in saying you know I don't know your experiences, I don't know, what you go through. I'm a 65 year old white male, however, you know I respect you and I want to help you, so he was actually more of a help

to me then the African-American [individuals] who didn't, so that was disappointing on that end of the African-American spectrum, but what a great experience to get to know someone who was open to finding that out.

Another example of Brandon's groupthink approach to his experiences not working successfully involved his peers. Brandon entered the program knowing several of the students in the second year cohort and quickly tried to reestablish his groupthink mentality behavior from his undergraduate time. What he found after the first year in graduate school, however, was that behaving from a groupthink frame of mind left him feeling empty and disconnected:

As a first year cohort we had a second year cohort that was above us, and they were a cohort that was very, very cliquy, and so I had a lot of friends in that cohort coming in, so I knew a lot of them. And they kind of reminded me of that popular group in high school, and honestly I didn't enjoy my first year, not because of them, but because I was so disconnected with the program. I felt like I wasn't a part of the social things, I had a small group of friends, but other than that I didn't really do much. It wasn't until I went on the study abroad trip the summer after my first, or really the spring after my first year that I really began to get connections and make friends and really just connect and hang out, and really just try to get some connections with anyone. There wasn't any particular person that I sought after, and in undergrad it was different. It was more who is more like me? Who likes things that I like? Who do I like, and that wasn't the case, I challenged myself among the other group of friends that I did have. We challenged ourselves...we are going to

go hang out with different people, we are going to go grab a cup of coffee or go hang out or go party with people that we are not used to hanging out with, or that we just don't see much of because we don't know what we are missing out, and it became one of the greatest things that we have done. I enjoyed my second year; I think more, surprisingly more, than my college experience. I love, like loved, my college experience. So, that should tell you just how much I loved my second year, and I loved it because I just had a different group of friends. I enjoyed different personalities, people that I probably would have never probably spoken to in undergrad because of I guess, probably, my ignorance or at my maturity level, and I loved it. I loved every minute of it during my second year, and I loved it because I was able to go to [name of institution], and just you know have lunch with anyone, and it wasn't about being popular, but it was about you know connecting with people and having fun and connecting with people at different levels, so I really enjoyed making connections with everyone at [name of institution].

Brandon shared that he chose to get to know others because he and his friends challenged themselves to do so. He realized, though, that he truly had a desire to get to know others despite the personal challenge he made with his friends:

I think there was a point where you can go in and you can again clique...you can start these small cliques with people and really what was most interesting about the environment was that I got a chance to...okay I can continue my habits that I did in undergrad or I can start over and actually seek out some real friends and try to seek out people that I actually really do want to get to

know and people that I never...people that I have shied away from people that I would generally in college absolutely not no way I won't hang out with you because you have this or you don't dress like this and you know. I'm not trying to make myself sound like a horrible person, I'm just being truthful, but you know giving other people a chance and not judging a book by its cover. So I think that is something for me and [name of prep program] kind of opened that field and said you know you are going to meet different people from different places and it is time to kind of branch out and I did get that opportunity at [name of prep program].

Groupthink Challenged Through Self-Reflection

Brandon identified self-reflection as a skill he acquired in graduate school and an activity that he was required to participate in through his coursework in the preparation program. This activity and skill helped him to move out of groupthink and learn more for himself about the “real reasons” he was in graduate school:

So it really starts with that [statement of purpose within the application] and you kind of figuring out okay why do I want to be here, is it because I just had a good time being an RA, or because I liked being chief justice for student government? You know what are the real reasons? Kind of figuring out the reasons there and kind of looking at myself and thinking this is going to be the next step for me and I really want other people to have not the same experience as me, but a great collegiate experience. And so that was something that I really had to think about, so that was kind of the first self-reflection piece that really got me thinking that maybe this is going to be a lot

about looking in and working on me, helping me, and you know not only my students, but helping me.

[Name of prep program]'s program is... a lot of it is focused on self-reflection, a lot of it is looking inside you and saying okay before you can help a student how can we help you be a better professional, how can we help you be a better person? You know what is it now that you are doing that will hold a student back. You know what is it right now that is holding you back? I...and I don't necessarily compare it to a counseling program because you know we always hear that if you go into student affairs you are always expected to be a lawyer, mother, father, counselor, all that good stuff so we kind of have a tough job as well, but my friends that are in the counseling program...my friend that is in a counseling and MBA program they have to go through counseling themselves to purge whatever issues it is that they have that could effect their patients and clients and for us we need to be self-reflective and have programs that look inside of us and mold something of us because too. We are still adolescents because a lot of us start our careers very young and you know we start, I am a few years older then my students and I'm expected to think ten years in advance more then my students so it is kind of, it is kind of not really a balance yet.

Brandon also shared that it was through self-reflection that he learned that he could no longer be the star of the show. This was challenging because as an undergraduate this was often his motivation, again using groupthink to make decisions that would look good on a student affairs preparation program application. Through self-

reflection, Brandon realized his motivation behind the decisions he made as an undergraduate, and felt challenged to learn to cultivate the leadership development of undergraduate students:

In college I think, as a student leader, I was a different person. I was someone who was very driven, overworked, over-involved in so many things, trying to keep up with academics and you know trying to be in this organization and that organization. Some organizations I was in purely because they were fun, other organizations I really worked hard to be in, and others honestly were resume builders absolutely. I think that when you move from being a student leader to being in student services or student affairs the spotlight changes a bit. It changes a lot. You begin to not be the star of the show, but you are what I would consider to be a supporting actor. You very much put the spotlight on the students and their experience, and you are trying to help them have a wonderful experience or an experience that is at least meaningful to them in their collegiate career. That was very different for me, and I'm not saying that I'm not...that I'm the star of the show and I didn't like the fact that I wasn't. It was a very different perspective. It was different to begin to focus on trying to cultivate students on a collegiate career. I think that something about self-reflection that is difficult is that it is difficult opening yourself up and looking at yourself and seeing how you work and seeing your weaknesses, because I think a lot of times in undergrad as a student leader you are on a roll and you hear so many positive things about you and criticism isn't really something that you are used to. I think student leaders aren't used

to that, unless you...I think some positions merit that, like the RA position, I did get a lot of great feedback from my area coordinator about things I could improve, but even then I didn't get a lot, and I know I could have improved more. I think, I think it is hard for some undergraduate students to take criticism, especially in my generation, so I really began to get a lot of good criticism and good feedback in graduate school, both personally and professionally. Both how I talk to students and how...and I can talk to students, but more so how I can help students, you know, my work ethic, as far as me being organized or unorganized. It was a challenge. It was an all around challenge. Because then you get to look at yourself and then you get to see who are you outside of your fraternity, who are you outside of that SGA role.

Both self-reflection and a desire for meaningful relationships with others challenged Brandon's groupthink way of making meaning, causing him to begin to make decisions for himself and determine his own beliefs and values instead of adopting those of others around him.

Groupthink Challenged Through Observation

Another of the activities that Brandon found helpful as he moved out of groupthink was to watch others around him. This helped him to see that people approach experiences in different ways:

Really for me it is just looking at how other people think and manage their time. Looking at how other people interact with students. I think that changed how I look at things. I think I used to look at how other people and

myself included think about things and think it is just the right way, and that is not really the case and you know you have to look and see. I think that you know we are all learning and we are all trying to figure out how to best help students, so you know just because someone does it with great authority doesn't mean that they are doing it correctly, so I think that is something that I really learned.

I saw how some faculty members related to people and so I saw some of my favorite faculty members really making wonderful connections and I saw a faculty member that to me socially did not know how to relate to people and it was very unfortunate because [he or she] is a wonderful person and [he or she] is a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant [person], but I just saw that oh my gosh socially you are not as advanced as your terminal degree or you know, your brilliant mind, you can dissect a problem or dissect a theory in a hot minute, but you know socially it was like oh okay.

Brandon has continued this new way of thinking into his role as a new professional:

You know I think those new perspectives, when I look at something I don't look at it for its cover value. I don't look at the cover of the book and think oh that's it. You know, I kind of look at it three dimensional, that sounds weird, I look at it though from different angles, I definitely see it from a different angle, I look at it from you know, I look at it from something that is different, you know I'm looking though here, I really see it as multiple views though instead of one.

I think it has shaped me in so many different ways both personally and professionally. I think professionally it has shaped me to be both very reflective in how I deal with students. It has shaped me in a way to look outside the box for answers, and really shaped my curiosity. I think curiosity is a big part of our job and asking questions and trying to kind of figure out what is behind the curtain instead of just judging the curtain fabric itself as an analogy. I think the [name of student affairs preparation program] program has really made me aware of those things. It has really made me aware of a lot of professional opportunities out there that most people might not be aware of at different institutions or at smaller institution. You know there are those programs like [name of student affairs preparation program] or the well known ones like [name of student affairs preparation program], you know all those other really good programs out there and I think that [name of student affairs preparation program] has really done a very good job network-wise. Me as a person...personally I think it has shaped me to really grow up. It was kind of a jolt into okay you have left adolescents [Brandon], it is time to take advantage of adulthood and really form yourself as a person. Really get to know yourself outside of the groupthink mentality that you were leaving from your undergraduate institution.

A New Way of Thinking

Brandon's new approach to making meaning was not like the approach of groupthink that he took as an undergraduate. No longer was he concerned with discovering what others thought in order to determine his own thoughts. Rather, his interactions with his peers in graduate school just happened:

I think it was just a part of my every day experience. At some point, I didn't have to think about it. I could just talk to a friend, one of my grad school friends, or go out to eat with them, there was no...there wasn't a thought at some point about it.

The way that Brandon came to interact with his graduate school friends allowed him to establish real relationships with people. Instead of succumbing to the beliefs and values of his friends, Brandon was able to see his own values and beliefs as separate from his peers and continues to be a part of how he approaches relationships today. Through his new approach, Brandon was able to recognize the other and was comfortable with differences between himself and the other in the relationship:

I feel like I kind of stepped back two steps in college oddly enough, but I loved studying people and seeing how they work and I love relating to that one thing in somebody that you know you are like oh my goodness we are so different, but there is something that we relate to, and I think too, I don't necessarily go into a friendship or a relationship all of the time thinking okay me, me, me, what do you relate to about me? I often go in thinking this person is very different whether it is a friendship or an association or anything...this person is very different or taking the I out and you know I just

want to know about that person, so it won't always be about me, and I think that is something that I have learned about relating to people you know you are not going to be the same and sometimes the people that are the most like you are the people that you just don't want to be around. I don't want to be around somebody who is just like me. You know one [Brandon] is good enough and I really just appreciate people and human beings in general.

Separating his own values and beliefs from those around him was not just an approach Brandon took with his friends. Brandon's assistantship was on a nearby campus, and it was there that Brandon had two experiences that challenged him to determine for himself his own thoughts and beliefs. Brandon's assistantship was in residence life where he specifically worked within an all male residence hall. One of the most significant experiences Brandon had involved a resident assistant (RA) he thought should go into student affairs, and the second was witnessing a relationship unfold between a fellow graduate student and another RA.

Through his interactions with his RA, Brandon began to realize what it meant for him to be in a role as a student affairs professional and that it was different than the role of "star student" he had as an undergraduate student. Although he struggled at first, Brandon eventually came to understand that he was in a position to cultivate leadership within undergraduate students versus creating a cookie cutter version of himself within undergraduate students:

I believe having an absolutely amazing RA, or an amazing student, who really just helped me realize that their track...really this student helped me to realize that I'm not trying to replicate my experience for students. I'm not trying to

get them to live out my experience. What I'm trying to get them to do is to just realize their potential, and that this student really helped me to realize that. This was a great student who I worked with on my staff, and was wonderful, and you know it was one of those things where I was like you are so good at this, you could be in student affairs and you know, and for just a milla second, I was just dumbfounded, I was like I don't understand why you don't want to be in student affairs, and then I realized that this is not the point of this...you know to create another [Brandon]. This is, you know, what I'm supposed to be doing is cultivating a leader...helping cultivate a leader.

Brandon explained that the reason he thought his RA would want to go into student affairs was because he saw a lot of himself in her. This connection to himself led to Brandon's assuming that she would choose the same path he did:

Our personalities were a lot alike, she was very driven, she was very outgoing, she loved being a leader, and I saw so much of her...I guess, I saw so much of me in her that I assumed that, 'my gosh, she is going to do great in student affairs' you know, at the time she didn't enjoy her major and I was someone who didn't enjoy my major in college and she was kind of looking and kind of testing the waters to see what she wanted to do. And I thought my goodness this is the perfect time to swoop in and do the whole student affairs/higher ed spiel for her and I didn't really give her an option, and that wasn't really her passion and for a good while, at least a few weeks, I almost tried to force feed her my passion, which wasn't hers. I think I was trying to promote the field, but you know, it was at one point that I was trying to, you know, I guess give

her my experience, and make her have my experience and even in how I advised her in some things, and I thought you know I need to step back because this is how I would handle it, you know, and I necessarily don't want her to handle things the way that I did, not because they were bad, but because that is what [Brandon] did, not what [name of RA] was doing.

Realizing that it was okay for another to choose a different path than he did was something that Brandon learned from his RA. When asked how he learned that his RA might not want to follow the same path he did, Brandon shared that it was a realization he came to on his own by reflecting on her choice to make different decisions than he did. Brandon's awareness that others might choose different paths did not mean that he was always accepting of the choices of others, as was demonstrated in his disapproval of his co-worker's and peer's relationship decision. Brandon also questioned his experiences with others in his assistantship site based on their responses to the situation:

I had a co-worker who decided to have a relationship with an undergraduate student. This undergraduate student was an RA and we were Resident Director's, so that was pretty awkward. It was pretty terrible, it was so challenging to where I really considered resigning and at that point I could finish up my degree without really having an assistantship because it was so late in the year. It was pretty significant because I just really didn't agree with, I mean there have been things where I don't agree with it, but it was never so much where I wanted to leave, and I just feel strongly about this. It was a challenge to say you know what if the director supports it and if the vice

president for student affairs supports it then I will keep my mouth shut but it was very difficult, very difficult for me, and it took awhile for me to really to deal with it and get used to it. Unfortunately it was one of those things to where had I had another year there I might have, I mean the philosophy was just so different, you know I was really glad that I was graduating because had I had another year there I don't know if I would have pursued it. You know not [name of student affairs preparation program], but the actual [assistantship site location] position and at that time there was a new director and she was fairly young and fairly inexperienced and so I think that had a little bit to do with it, so it was one of those good lessons for me to learn that this is what I will deal with in a job and this is what I won't.

When dealing with the inappropriate relationship, Brandon started to form his own internal thoughts regarding the relationship, despite what others thought. At first, Brandon articulated that his frustration was because this would not have happened with his first supervisor who would have agreed with him:

In my first year, the director for residence life, was my director supervisor and I found a mentor in her because she was just a wonderful person. We got a new supervisor. And she was great, but very different, very, very different. So under her leadership the office was very different and I can deal with that, because you know everyone is very different and that was one of the decisions that she made that I immediately did my whole...oh my gosh, if my former supervisor was here this wouldn't happen, and I didn't verbalize that because I know that doing that drives people crazy, but I definitely thought it and I was

definitely of that mindset, and that was a huge struggle for me to know that a year ago this would have been a different situation.

Upon further explanation though, Brandon was able to describe why he was not comfortable with the relationship for himself, and demonstrated some acceptance of the fact that people handle experiences differently. Brandon also noted that he might have to deal with similar situations in the future and was okay recognizing that he might handle them differently:

I know that things happen, I know that at different schools there are different policies and things but [name of assistantship site] was very small where I did my assistantship and I was also bothered that the RD just started and within maybe three months of him starting he had already pursued three RAs and found a girlfriend, within three months, so the credibility wasn't even really built up to where it was like oh you have been here for a year and I've really connected with an RA. I think it would have been a really different world had he said gosh I have been here for two years and there is this one RA and it just happened. We just fell in love and we just had to date. I think that would have been a timing issue. It just seemed very uh...it just seemed like he overly pursued some RAs, there were some ethical and moral issues going on there. That really became a difficult task for me. I really had to step back and at some point the vice president came and talked to me about it, and my vice president was very much a peacekeeper, so she wanted us to move on, and so I took about 2-3 days off to just collect, because I was just that upset about it, and I really had to figure out that it wasn't my battle, and had I been his

supervisor it would have been different. It would have been handled my way, and I wasn't, I was a colleague and I was going to have to deal with it for the remainder of my career there.

After questioning himself and his reaction to the situation, Brandon held on to his belief that the relationship was wrong despite the visit from the Vice President.

Instead, his Vice President's reaction affected Brandon's opinion of her:

I just think that she wanted to move on because she did probably have bigger fish to fry. But she did want to check in and see how I was doing, and she didn't have a very good understanding about why I was bothered by it. What I think was most damning about the entire process was that she didn't understand why I was upset. She didn't understand what was wrong with it. For me to have to explain that to a wonderful woman who has been in the business for thirty years and is just a superstar, you know, was just really puzzling to me, and I really had to step back and say my gosh is it all me? Or am I just being upset for no reason? And you know, I wasn't. I had a reason to be and that was just the difference in our opinions I think, and that was just...it was one of those things that I think you know this is a battle lost and this is something that you know it is just falling on deaf ears, and I understand coming from her position why she wants to make sure that we are all harmonious because we did have jobs to do.

This choice to maintain his own opinion of his peer's decision was a change for Brandon from his mindset as an undergraduate where he wanted to go along with everyone around him. He now chose to participate in experiences because he wanted

to do them not because of groupthink. A final way that Brandon's new way of thinking was affirmed was by his winning of the Outstanding Graduate Student of the Year award:

At the end of the year I won the graduate student of the year for [name of institution] and I think for me it is not the award it is the fact that what people said about me. That making connections outside of my office and not just sticking to a certain clique, going outside and talking to different people, and I was willing and ready to work or hang out with anybody and I think that was one of my greatest achievements.

By the end of his time in the student affairs preparation program, Brandon was able to see how he used to think compared to now:

I joined a lot of things in college because they would look good for a resume. And you know at the time it was like I kinda want to go into higher ed and it was a full speed ahead and I loved higher ed and I was just joining things and really exhausting myself and thinking oh this will look great, this will look great, this will look great and I always recommend to people no matter how much you want to compete with other grad students and you want to get into a program do things that you want to do, don't do things that you feel like you have to do because you are not...you are going to short change your experience and in college, I'm sorry, in grad school. I felt as though I wasn't joining things or I wasn't doing things just because I was doing them but because I really wanted to do them. I wanted to be on a committee, I wanted to be a moderator, I didn't feel like I had to, and in some ways you need to get

yourself out there but again it is in your hands if you want to do these things and get yourself out there so I think definitely in grad school I wanted to do these things. I wanted to do them to better myself. I'm not doing them to keep up with the Jones's.

For me it is a pause. So when I am in a meeting and when I am talking to a student, I will never forget this, professor [name of professor], and it will stick with me for the rest of my life and she said it in such a simple way, she said and she is a brilliant woman by the way, [name of professor] said, you know when you, we have [an assignment], I think I told you about this, where you speak in a voice of another minority or majority, and you know when you are speaking in this voice, when you are thinking about it, when you [are done with the assignment] she said, when you [are done with this assignment] you should be in a room with a group of people and you should be thinking about the students and the people and the minorities and the different personalities, you should be speaking for not only those in the room, but those who are not in the room. And that truly stuck with me, I mean it was so simple and it was so powerful and you know, and it made me almost go I literally sometimes go into meetings and I look around and think who are we talking about? We are talking about this student and we are talking about this group are we considering those with disabilities? Are we considering those who don't believe in this? Who doesn't want to see a Christmas tree up with a big cross on it in their residence hall...who are we considering and who are we thinking about as we are talking about our students? And honestly that quote had the

biggest impact on how I think you know about other students and about other religions and other things of that nature.

Moving Out of Groupthink

When Brandon first began the student affairs preparation program he took the same approach, groupthink, to interacting with his environment that he had as an undergraduate student. Brandon was aware that he had a groupthink mentality and learned through the program that for him to move out of it he would need to work at changing his approach to understanding his experiences. No longer would it work for him to accept what a person in a position of leadership said without giving it his own consideration. At first, learning that he had thoughts different than others left him feeling as though he might be doing something wrong (e.g., his concern with feeling no connection between himself and other African-Americans). It also led Brandon to feel disconnected from the program, wanting meaningful relationships, and gave him the motivation to want more.

Through the process of self-reflection and observation, Brandon began to see who he was outside of what he was involved in and others around him. Two experiences in particular helped Brandon to acquire this ability. The first was with a student RA who did not choose to go into student affairs, and the second was with a co-worker's relationship. In both situations, Brandon was able to, on his own, separate himself from the situation and explore it from the perspective of the other. These experiences affirmed for Brandon this new way of approaching his experiences, which allowed him to begin to engage in authentic relationships with others, as well as select experiences that he was truly interested in. Brandon now, as

a new professional, understands that he can be curious and asks questions instead of just adopting his thoughts and ways of being from others around him.

Ashley

Ashley grew up with the undergraduate college that her parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles had attended just down the road. Ashley explains that this is why she can remember getting her first college guide at age 12:

I think growing up in such proximity especially to [name of institution] and grandparents, my parents, aunts and uncles, everybody went there and going to games. [Name of institution] was such the college...when I thought about what a college would look like it was [name of institution] and I think that got me interested in kind of the life of the university. I wouldn't have been able to use those words to describe that interest. I was just really intrigued by it. I think part of it is that I'm an only child and I think growing up there was some kind of mystique about what goes on in college.

Ashley's interest in colleges, as well as her desire to be a college athlete, translated into her being a three-time transfer student during her undergraduate time, ultimately receiving a degree in advertising and public relations in just four years. Prior to attending a student affairs preparation program, Ashley worked for two years for a food service company that serviced institutions of higher education, and according to Ashley she realized she, "like [d] working with college students" and wanted to, "take the business element out of it."

Although Ashley researched three student affairs preparation programs on the Internet, she applied to only two. One of the factors that made an impression on

Ashley was the ease of navigation of the website of the student affairs preparation program she did end up attending. She was also very attracted to the assistantship piece that was required in the program she selected. Ashley felt strongly that she needed some experience since she did not think she had been involved outside of the classroom enough when she was an undergraduate student.

Of the two programs Ashley applied to one was near where she lived, which, in addition to its strong reputation, was a main part of the reason she had applied. Ultimately, Ashley came to the realization that attending that program would be cost prohibitive. For Ashley, it was a requirement that she receive an assistantship because she “wasn’t really willing to go significantly deeper into debt at that point in time.” This did not mean that Ashley selected the program that she did because of the financial piece, although, “that really helped.” Instead Ashley decided to attend the program that she did because of its “reputation,” and the current students in the program, “spoke highly of it”:

I felt like I didn’t know a ton about the academic parts of [name of student affairs preparation program] because the interview process was so heavy on the working part, I feel like you kind of got hired first and then you started to become aware of what you would actually be learning and gaining from it.

The assistantship Ashley ended up selecting was at another institution, which was not uncommon:

There are [several] off campus sites that [name of student affairs preparation program] works with and they are...usually year after year they are a part of the program.

The specific assistantship site Ashley worked at was at a smaller, religiously affiliated, private institution. For over 30 years, graduate students within Ashley's student affairs preparation program had found assistantships at the site. One of the characteristics of the assistantship site that was attractive to Ashley was how honest everyone was about the institution's identity, including the areas that might be challenging. The other assistantship sites did not seem as transparent. Ashley was able to identify the positive or more progressive aspects of the institution while also recognizing any challenges:

It was pretty conservative, which was a shock at first but I have to give [name of assistantship site] credit, and I know that when I was interviewing people to fill my position they are very upfront in terms of telling you that this is a conservative institution. There is no student group to serve students that are lesbian, gay, bisexual...that does not exist there. So, I was like oh, but I know that when I visited they really emphasized that was a board of trustees feeling and that the student feeling was a little bit more progressive and that the residential, the residence life staff was much more kind of open and supportive...as I think that most professionals within residence life tend to be. So, that definitely made it bearable.

They were honest about things that were maybe going to be challenging at [name of assistantship site], where some of the other schools I was kind of like well I don't really know, I feel like I couldn't really get a read on what the position really entails or what the people would really be like to work with,

where talking with [name of assistantship site] was really very much like face value.

Another attractive component of the assistantship for Ashley was the separation it allowed for her to have between school and work, which allowed her to feel like a fulltime professional:

Yeah, I, it was really interesting being at [name of assistantship site] because it kind of compartmentalized the work experience and the school experience, so I felt very much like a full time professional.

They were really supportive of us exploring different functional areas within student affairs, but also getting us involved right away. It wasn't like what are you doing? You go to school an hour and 45 minutes from here. We were treated like professionals and we had a lot of responsibility.

Feeling Unprepared and Challenged

Although Ashley liked being treated as a professional in her assistantship, she also quickly found herself feeling unprepared for the reality of the position and questioned if she was in the right program. During Ashley's first semester a student committed suicide, in addition to other stressors at her assistantship site:

About a week before the student passed away they also did a major budget cut at [name of assistantship site] and they ended up laying off 48 people which you can imagine at a school with only 2100 students 48 is a big dent. Part of that is that they also laid-off one of the hall directors which affected my job. I ended up absorbing another hall. I went from having one building with a 120 young ladies to having a second building, which was all male, which had

about a hundred. So, in the course of about a month, it was in about November that all of this happened, we had the budget cut, and then my job changed, and then the student passed away while we were at a conference, we were off campus too, and that was just stressful because we felt like we weren't there for our students and then literally every week until we closed for winter break there was suicidal ideations and it was just like oh my god and what I was saying earlier too with the class thing, with some of my classes fall semester I was already frustrated by things and it was just like that, plus the job things and it was really just like is this the right thing, am I doing the right thing? Am I satisfied by what is happening? That sort of thing. At the end of one semester one of my classmates decided not to continue studying at [name of student affairs preparation program] and ended up enrolling in a seminary the following year, and I know that I was really looking into counseling programs thinking maybe I am not getting the preparation that I need here to be working with these students because I felt kind of helpless.

Ashley also felt unprepared in the classroom, despite doing well academically as an undergraduate student. She thought that the program would tell her what skills she needed to work with undergraduate students, and attributed some of her struggle to being a business major while an undergraduate student:

I was not prepared for the deep rooting in the social science and some of those things. I had a lot of classmates that came from psychology or sociology studies and having been a much more marketing and business oriented person I was a little taken aback by the initial theory class and the dualism and

talking about some of that exploration and development and I was like crap what did I get myself into...I wasn't ready for that. It just took me a little while to figure out. I think I expected the program to be a lot more kind of like well here are the skills that you need to work with college students now go do it.

For Ashley, because she had accepted an assistantship on another campus, classes started in the summer. Ashley felt overwhelmed by the intensity of the program, and even though she thought that she would fail out, she ended up performing better than expected:

So we knocked six hours out of the way that way and that let us take a lighter load than on campus students in the following semesters, which helped with the travel piece.

Second year students called it summer boot camp because it was a semester condensed into 6 or 8 weeks we did two sessions of class a week for two different classes, so it was intense. It was not only not having a grasp on social science but it was also six hours a week of being confused. I had never studied so much in my entire life. I would go to class and I would come home and I would read. It was like I read and I would go to class and I came home and I read and went to class and then I read. It was different after working two years in food service; it was like brain go on, so I think I almost wouldn't want to have known. I think the shock kind of helped me to push through and I kept thinking in my mind, I'm going to fail out, I'm going to have to beg for

my old job back I'm so upset that I'm going to fail. I ended up doing much better than I ever thought.

Asked to share her thoughts. Ashley found the teaching style of the faculty just as challenging as the information she was learning:

I liked my teacher like as a person, he was really like okay so tell me more, tell me why, a lot of devil's advocate. At that point I was still grasping for, "where is this going to be useful? I don't get it!" But just the style at the time was frustrating for me.

The way the assignments were structured was different from her undergraduate experience—project-based work while an undergraduate versus more abstract or theoretical as a graduate student. Ashley found she was being asked to approach her coursework in an entirely different way:

Well, I mean I think it was totally reframing the way that I thought. I was an advertising and public relations major in undergrad and so very project oriented. You gather information, you kind of thought about it, you assembled it into a product you turn it in and you are done. There wasn't a lot of thought and exploration. And the program at [name of student affairs preparation program] was much more like well why do you think that way? And looking at some of the social science, I really didn't have a strong background in, but I definitely tried to catch up quickly but it was a totally different way of thinking. It was exploring thoughts instead of creating a product.

Part of Ashley's struggle was the way in which she was connected to her coursework. As an undergraduate student Ashley viewed her coursework as, "a reflection of her." Doing poorly on an assignment meant she thought less of herself. While a graduate student, Ashley was challenged to no longer see her coursework this way and to share her own thoughts:

It is terrifying looking back. It is one of those oh my god how did I ever write a paper before grad school? I think I had a lot more of myself invested before. A paper was more like a reflection of me. If I did bad on a paper I was like well oh that is really bad. Where as now I am like well I just did a bad job on the paper. And I think it is funny because the first paper that we did was a self-reflection, go figure, and it was like making your own student development theory, which I had never heard of student development theory so I didn't know what the heck they were talking about and I got a B on the paper and I was like how I could I get a B on the paper about myself?

Ashley was looking to be told how to apply what she was learning, and she saw the need to be able to do so immediately within her assistantship due to the suicide and the lay-offs. When she did not receive such instruction, it left her frustrated:

Yeah, and well there was a big disconnect between what I needed and what I was learning with my job because of the stress that was coming up with the students I felt ill-equipped to kind of address what they needed. I mean all of that was useful, but when all of that was going on, I was in an environments class where we are talking about way-finding and like defining a sense of

place and that wasn't helping me with suicidal ideation. There was a disconnect.

I think that the biggest disappointment for me was the initial coursework not having something where I felt like I could really hit the ground running where I could really help the students that I was working with. Like a counseling class and I know that I was a little concerned too because they added a multicultural competency class the requirement for the year that came in behind me, which I thought was valuable but for me seeing the required classes already where really heavy on the theory and the human aspect and not necessarily on the...not necessarily tasky, but like the skills that you could apply right away and I was a little nervous about that and then also starting in the summer being frustrated by theory already.

Not fitting in. Ashley did not feel like she fit in with her peers, which contributed to her feeling of being unprepared for the program:

I felt that I was an outsider because I was aware of how different my experiences were not only the knowledge that I had, but also professionally my background. It just felt odd. I felt like I stuck out. I wondered if I did the right thing. I just felt like this isn't working.

This sense of feeling different from everyone else was a part of Ashley's experience despite her spending time with other graduate students from the start of the program:

A large group of us lived in [name of institution] that summer which was an experience itself, so we spent a lot of time together socially. At night [name of city program is in] is a lively town for daytime and evening activities, but

we spent a lot of social time outside of class. Even if I was writing a paper my friend would be like let's go to Dairy Queen, so a lot of informal gatherings. But also we had...a program intern who plans activities for us every week throughout the summer. So like, one weekend we would go to the zoo and then we would go to [name of amusement park] it was like we were little kids on field trips, but we needed it because we were stressed out from [the week], which is legitimately what it felt like, and it helped us not only get to know our cohort, but a lot of second years were around doing summer internships or taking classes, so we got to know some of them a little bit better.

In Ashley's mind she did not measure up when she compared herself to her peers because she did not have the same past experiences that they did, and, to her, they all seemed to have similar experiences. Her concern about not having the same experiences as her peers left her feeling inadequate, and she was unable to see the benefits of her own past experiences:

I often felt like I was one of the only students who hadn't been president of my sorority. When I was there sometimes I feel like student affairs, at least the grad program I was in, was disproportionately strong in leadership positions in undergrad, which I think is a great thing because I think a lot of times that is who we are trying to recruit, but not having been that person it has sometimes felt a little bit like an outsider because I didn't have that reference base. Like I didn't even know what a student organization was. I knew that students were in clubs, but I didn't know that there was this whole

formal structure of things and of money and that you could get money and now I am like oh my god like, I feel like if I went back now I would know so much more so I think that was a big piece.

Another way that Ashley felt different from her peers had to do with her experiencing problems with a faculty member:

This is funny it was kind of a running joke with especially my [name of assistantship site] colleagues. They had been in the class and had a hard time with it and they recognized some of the challenge too. The initial mistake was sharing some information about a roommate that I had my first year in college and I think she perceived some of that information to say that I was a racist, which didn't go well. What I said was not racist, or it was not understood that way by me and my peers, but I think she took some of it that way, which was interesting and then I also made the mistake of choosing [to learn more about the race] that [the faculty member] was, so I think it was a slippery slope. I shouldn't have shared and then I should have [learned about] something totally different. And then whenever I was writing I was like is she going to be upset that I have said this and let me think about this and I would really reflect on what I was writing and...which ended up being good, not that I would have stereotyped, but avoiding stereotypes completely and not saying anything without some kind of rationale or research and that ended up being helpful. And then [name of faculty member] was a very challenging instructor. She was just so hard and I felt like I always did bad on her tests

and I felt like compared to some of my other friends I wasn't quite sure how I was going to do.

Ashley identified that she was being challenged by her instructor, which while she understood the challenge to be good for her, Ashley responded by working to not upset her professor further. Ashley was frustrated that her professor saw her initial comment as racist. She did not consider why her professor had come to that conclusion, and gave no thought to if she was racist. While she worked through the challenges, Ashley also sought out support from her peers, having them confirm for her that the class was hard and the professor was challenging.

Unclear boundaries. An experience that Ashley and her peers had together one night resulted in the arrest of one of her classmates:

I was out that night as well. I think I admittedly was a little bit wilder that weekend too. We were all celebrating because it was our first weekend and we were officially blah, blah, blah, but they went a little too far and [someone] got arrested and had a little too much to drink and thought [he or she] was in [a] friend's apartment and [he or she] wasn't. [A] woman [was scared] and she called the police.

For Ashley, this experience was hard to make sense of since the student stayed in the program:

But I think we were surprised by some of the treatment that he got. That he was in the program because that seems like a boundary to me. Like you get arrested and you are working with students how do you come to terms with that? I know that was something that my supervisor would joke about like

you can do what you want because you are an adult, but if you get arrested it was great working with you.

Part of Ashley's struggle with understanding the choices she should be making around alcohol had to do with the mixed messages she saw being sent by some of the faculty:

I think that, I'm trying to think of how I want to say this, [name of town] is definitely some similar to [her hometown] in that there are a lot of bars and that was a big part of [name of prep program]'s culture...which was really funny being at [name of assistantship site] where the entire campus is dry, so we didn't take part in the alcohol festivities nearly as often as I think the on-campus [graduate] students.

I think some of it...part of what I'm thinking about is the culture of the program. Like I said, it seems like especially with the [name of tradition], it was so open, you know...alcohol is fine, there is nothing inherently evil about alcohol, and I know that [beer and wine were available at some of the advising sessions]...and meanwhile we were sitting awkwardly in a small room eating pizza and it was definitely different.

On the one hand Ashley witnessed the faculty inviting the students to events where alcohol was provided, while on the other she was sitting through what to her felt was a lecture from a faculty member about how they should not be partying after a peer was arrested. Ashley expressed a desire for structure, a clear right and wrong when it came to alcohol and the expectations of the program. She also described a need to have such expectations established from the beginning:

I think if the faculty were that angry about the culture of the program [after a peer's arrest] then they need to talk about it and address it as the beginning of the program because some of the events that we had lent themselves to kind of...we would have a Friday night event and that was the expectation. Second years would kind of communicate that to the first years and then we go out and we are all going to go out together and this is where we go and that is just what you did, so I think talking about it at the beginning about what kind of professional do you want to be? And I think talking about it when you start and not in October when you have already been doing that for two months and it seems like the norm and that has been communicated to you from other students and that is fine.

Ashley's desire for the faculty to set clear boundaries regarding alcohol use she believes would have helped her to resist adopting norms from her peers. She recognizes that she could set boundaries for herself based what she believes is proper alcohol use, however doing so was a struggle. The unclear expectations around alcohol that Ashley received left her feeling guilty:

Well, I'm like a guilty person already, so I had already felt bad about that night. Especially being at [name of assistantship site], I felt guilty anyway doing anything that didn't involve just sitting and reading quietly because it was like you are bad if you don't have a food plate in front of you and it starts to mess with your head with alcohol consumption. It starts to seem weird. I just felt guilty well what should I be doing, and it was like well I'm an adult

and I can do what I want, but figuring out what you feel comfortable doing what you want where and when and it was interesting.

Ashley's desire for clear expectations around alcohol is similar to her wanting knowledge from class that she could apply right away to her assistantship experiences. When neither of these experiences provided her with a clear direction, Ashley developed a negative attitude:

I was definitely the jerk cynic who thought it was stupid and that this class is a waste of time. I never really got into it from the scholarly place saying, I know that sometimes with the required internship piece I think [name of student affairs preparation program] can sometimes attract a group you know I want the practical experience so that I can get a job and that is kind of how I felt.

Unfortunately I think, as many cynics experience, it kind of bled into other things. I hated going to [campus]. It just seemed like a waste of time to me the class portion I was like why I can't I just be at [name of assistantship site] working where I am really learning. And especially I loved the teacher that I had and I know that he is really wise, but we did not always connect in a way that I typically would with a teacher. I found his style kind of frustrating because he made us look inside ourselves, go figure, very student affairs. He would say what do you think...that kind of a teacher which now is exactly what I think in people that I supervise, which I'm sure they love, but I was just really frustrated and I was like you are the teacher, you know tell me, right, very developmental. That was an experience. I think that, part of that was my

fault, like in a class, well I was like I had this class, and I had this program so I hate [name of student affairs preparation program], so why do I even have to come over here?

Being asked to share her thoughts by having to “look inside” herself was so frustrating to Ashley that she became a “cynic.” Ashley preferred focusing on the practical side of her preparation program experience by focusing on her assistantship, and questioned why she was even bothering to go to class.

Feeling Support

Ashley was aware of her desire for clear boundaries and appreciated the support she felt from the structure provided to her in her assistantship site:

I think in general I am very big on boundaries, so that was very fine with me. Especially at [name of assistantship site] it was very easy and that was very fine with me. As much as it felt restrictive, I liked that it made it obvious. It was here is the line. Don't step across it and I was like done, got it. It made the [name of institution] environment a relief.

The relief Ashley felt because of the boundaries established in her assistantship environment allowed Ashley to feel comfortable with her supervisor, who in turn helped her to connect what she was learning in the classroom to the work she was doing in her assistantship:

Her name was [name of supervisor], she was just really good. She was one of those people with this endless amount of energy, which she needed for her job. She was pretty much there all of the time, and I was amazed by her schedule. There were 7 hall directors and she also had biweekly meetings

with every Greek president, so it was constant one-on-one meetings, but she was always supportive and knew everything that was going on with me and was really supportive when I talked about being upset with [name of prep program]. I know one of my other colleagues he eventually dropped out first semester because he felt the same way. She was really supportive. He was able to stay at [name of assistantship site] and completed the year there. We always felt really supported and we never felt like oh we can't tell you this. I always felt like she got it in a way that I didn't realize and appreciate until it was over...which was kind of like [name of prep program].

We would talk frequently about our coursework and what we were learning and then also the struggles of the job, and kind of integrate some of that. I think that was probably the biggest thing. It was another safe space and I never felt like I had to edit myself with her.

I think the biggest thing especially at [name of assistantship site], and I know [name of prep program] mandated you had to meet every other week or something with your supervisor. I met with mine every week for an hour, which was awesome because that was an hour of reflection every week. You know your job and she... cared a lot about school, but also what was going on outside of both of those, like how was like in general, so thinking about that. That helped me in seeing kind of how things fit together.

Ashley had a different supervisor her second year, and the support she received from this new supervisor changed, not because of the supervisor, but because Ashley herself had changed:

And then my second year my supervisor [was new]. She was one of those people that was very wise. She was a licensed clinical counselor. She was very intelligent and it seemed natural. At that time in my second year, I finally liked [name of prep program]. I loved the [name of prep program] and now I miss it. I understood residence life it didn't seem that confusing anymore. It was kind of all falling into place and she was much more of a peer to me. I think my first year it seemed slightly more directive. By my second year it was like this is the problem I'm having, what do you think?

Ashley's responsibilities were less confusing to her, and she was enjoying the student affairs preparation program more. Ashley also saw herself more as a peer to her supervisor, asking her supervisor for her thoughts so that Ashley could consider them rather than seeking out direct instruction for what to do from her supervisor.

Ashley received support through the opportunity to select her own classes. As Ashley was struggling with the challenges she experienced in the required courses, she found the freedom to choose her own courses to be a supportive structure within the preparation program environment. When she did select her own classes, she enjoyed her classes more particularly because she could take a taskier, or practical class:

Yeah, well I think one of the things that would have been helpful to me at [name of prep program] especially the first semester especially with the

assigned classes...the spring semester is when you finally had some freedom to take electives within the program and I ended up taking a legal issues class, big surprise for someone who likes tasky, project oriented work. But once I had a little bit more freedom, I think maybe even the content of the classes wouldn't have mattered so much, as just feeling like you had some control over what you were picking.

Regardless of the course content, it was the opportunity that Ashley was given to choose her own courses that offered her a sense of support.

Others' Perspectives and Self-Reflection

The coursework that Ashley experienced often challenged her to consider others' perspectives while participating in self-reflection. It was through these required activities that Ashley began to connect what she was learning in her coursework with the work she was doing with students:

[We had an assignment] where you [select] an identity different than your own and you kind of journal about it. We had to do that, it sounds like punishment, we had to do that...with different identities and I did not enjoy doing it. I will be honest, but it really helped me, I think in a way that I didn't realize at the time. The first person that I picked...I think I picked too many layers. It was really interesting because you had to try to have experiences. You had to try on different things and kind of write about approaching it from the mindset of that individual, and what happened and how you would feel about it, whether that was different cultural things, or being able to interview a student who maybe had some of those characteristics in common with that

voice. A later [person that I picked]...was really interesting and totally different in contrast, but I think being open to the experiences of others was really helpful. I think for me, and I think for a lot of us, it is so easy to be like well I would feel this way if this happened to me, but it was like well, what do I assume about this person that might not necessarily be true? So that was very helpful for me.

The way that Ashley described her thinking about the person that she had picked was that she had, “to figure out how to divide [Ashley] from this persona that I had developed.” Ashley was beginning to understand that others might have different thoughts and feelings based on their own experiences, that are different than her own thoughts and feelings.

Another way that Ashley was challenged to see others’ perspectives was through dialogue in her classes. Specifically, Ashley and her peers were required to participate in a class where they would discuss their assistantship experiences. Participating in this course gave Ashley the opportunity to compare her experiences to those of her peers and to become accepting of the differences:

My group was maybe 10-15 people and from all different functional areas and all different schools and it was kind of a really good way to see what other people’s experiences were cause all I usually heard was what was happening at [name of assistantship site] and then maybe the few people in my classes when we had kind of free time to share. But it helped me see kind of the range of experiences we had.

Seeking out the support she needed to adjust to the challenges that she was experiencing assisted Ashley in moving way from seeking answers externally.

Ashley's Change

Ashley understood that she was developing:

It is funny because I had this realization especially at the end of my first year, like I feel like they really are pulling a fast one on us like we were developing just as much as the students we were working with were and I think that is what I was experiencing. They were making me come up with the answer.

They weren't just telling us.

No longer was she going to be given the answers, but rather she was being asked to discover the answers for herself. Ashley even came to realize that some of the time there was no answer:

I had an outcomes class my second year and I was like I enjoy this. This isn't that hard it seems hard if you think that there is supposed to be a final answer, but there is not and that is okay. So, I think it was about coming to terms with the gray.

“Coming to terms with the gray” was the new approach Ashley took to her classes that allowed to enjoy the learning process more.

Eventually, Ashley also came to accept that there was no one set of experiences (e.g., sorority president) required to be a student affairs professional, and she began to value the experiences she had as an undergraduate student. No longer did she desire the same experiences as her peers, but rather she began to understand how to use her unique life experiences to shape her student affairs practice:

I think one of the reasons and maybe it isn't about being a transfer student, but part of the reason I transferred was for athletics and I think having the athletics background was really, really helpful too. Because I...I am trying to think. I don't think anyone had played varsity athletics they might have done pretty intense club. One might have done varsity. I think that was helpful. Having that reference point. At [name of assistantship site] some of the students that I worked with were athletes and it is like if you can't speak their language sometimes it can be really hard to be like I get why you don't want to do your homework because you are exhausted and you hazed your teammates and you want to go home and that makes sense. As far as being a transfer goes...I think some of it too and I don't know that I saw this play out, but understanding some of the curriculum with changing majors I think that ties in with transfers and just about the change. And I know that we talked a lot about transfers by the end...I had one teacher that her whole soapbox was that we are running out of 18 year olds...it was like [name of state] is running out of 18 year olds. We are all going to community colleges and so it was like...and I was like oh my God the world is ending, but not that I ever went to a community college, but being okay with the concept of transfer, I think for some of my peers it was much more kind of like out there.

Ashley labeled the way that she used to think about fitting in with her peers as “undergraduate,” and came to appreciate the differences:

Yeah, and it is funny because I laugh because I was not fully prepared for what I was getting into as I have made clear, but looking back it is one of

those holy crap, I can't believe I got out what I did and didn't even really know and am still continuing to figure out what I gained from that. I think as far as what I gained from others, I think moving out of the undergrad mindset of oh I like that we have things in common and if we don't have things in common well they are weird and they will stay weird and then by the end it was kind of like well I'm kind of weird and we are all kind of weird and that is okay, but I think appreciating that it is better to have someone who is...especially with internships having a totally different experience or you know someone who went home to their family or who had to drive hours to get here because they didn't want to move, that our experiences were so different.

The movement Ashley made in terms of how she approached making meaning of her experiences did affect her attitude by the end of the program. No longer was she seeking external direction for what she should be doing, but was beginning to make those determinations for herself:

I feel like for me the biggest outcome in that sense would be the way that I think just in general. It makes me appreciate the value of knowledge and having knowledge for knowledge's sake. I am a much bigger nerd then I ever was, which is a good thing and I celebrate that, but I think I think about things a lot more then I ever did. That I will really dwell on something to think about and be...I think the stimulation you get from thinking about an idea, which is something I didn't really get from undergrad. You know when I really needed to do homework I did it in a day, whereas in grad school I think

you...there is a lot more out there than just stuff...doing your job. You know I hated my job before I went to grad school. It felt very tedious and like I was just watching the clock, and I think during grad school and afterwards, I felt like yeah this can be extremely stressful, but I got much more of a sense of value and purpose than I did before, which is hello a canned student affairs answer, but I found...I felt like I found something that I enjoyed and I could do well with and make my own. That there wasn't one good way to do things. I think with my job...kind of being a workaholic like I talked about before, it lent itself to perfectionism, and I will never really shake that. I think the way that I do things can be good and can be different and be done as well as someone else who also does things well, and I think that was a really big perspective for me. That there wasn't just a perfect way that was up on a mountain, but that things can change and they shift and you have to get comfortable with that. I think also not being afraid of having a challenge.

Gaining Confidence

Over the summer, Ashley did an internship at another institution, where she got a variety of experiences, each of which helped her to feel more confident in her abilities. Ashley found it helpful that she was given a chance to put into practice what she learned during her first year in her student affairs preparation program, and that what she was learning applied to other institutions:

I think for me a big part was the summer in between. I got to see kind of a taste of life beyond [name of assistantship site] and beyond [name of prep program], like the other things that are out there so that I was aware that there

was a bigger spectrum in terms of student affairs and I think that so much of the work that I did was self-directed where I didn't have a lot of oversight. Where at [name of assistantship site] it wasn't micromanaged but it was so small. Everyone knew everything that was going on like if a parent called the Dean of Students knew. Like everyone was connected and coming to [summer internship site] it was much more like okay I need you to go do this, like here are some starting thoughts...go! So it was totally different and it made me feel a little bit more confident that I could just go and do it and be creative, which in residence life is possible but not always present because a lot of it is putting out fires so that was really good.

Ashley also became more confident in her new approach to making meaning of what she was experiencing and learning by winning a case study competition, and was able to articulate the difference in how she went about approaching it in her second year compared to her first:

It was really funny because we did one my first year and then again in my second year. The four of us from [name of assistantship site] did it. The one group they did bad because they only talked about theory. We were supposed to incorporate theory and how you would actually approach it. They only talked about theory for like 30 minutes. My group, I got also paired with another task-oriented person and we only talked about how we would solve the problem. What a shock! We should have mixed partners. And then the second year the case study experience was valuable for me because it really put together, it mirrored what was going on for me at school. I felt like I

could apply it, it was like I really understood it and I knew how to apply it. I wasn't just reaching for it and cutting and pasting, and I saw where it fit logically in a way that I didn't before, and it was outside of school and outside of [name of assistantship site], so it was like this is legit but I could do this in more of a professional setting and I think that gave me some of the confidence that I needed to kind of continue.

Ashley was able to apply what she had learned to the case study competition without having to seek external direction. Ashley was also beginning to apply what she was learning in the classroom to her practice:

I don't know if there was a specific moment. I would say probably toward the end of my first year, especially in supervision with my staff members it became very apparent especially some student development concepts. Getting to know the way that they were thinking, being more prepared for the way that they would respond to certain situations, and that really became more true my second year. I had some staff members where I realized you know they aren't bad or annoying they are just learning and they are in a place that is much different from some of the more mature more experienced students that I am working with and I know it isn't just because they are inexperienced its because they are developing and they are learning.

Ashley left the program recognizing that she is still learning:

I feel like I reached a place where I can function and can continue to grow not like I made it to the finish line of graduation. That wasn't a finish line that was a...we verify that we have trained you but it is not over.

Ashley came to understand that it is up to her to apply the skills and knowledge that she learned to the work that she does, and that she cannot just rely on what she was taught in her master's program:

I realized that it was a lot more...here is the way that you need to think, to be able to respond, to problem solve, and to be a critical thinker. Because if we teach you skills or pieces of knowledge they will be out of date so we need you to just be able to be a learner. So, it only took me a year and a half to be able to figure that out. Once I did I was very grateful.

Discovering Her Part in the Learning Process

Ashley began her journey in the student affairs preparation program wanting desperately for her environment to define her actions, and feeling unprepared when she compared herself to her peers. She wanted to fit in and to be told what to do when it came to making choices around alcohol, dealing with stressful experiences within her assistantship, and the approach she needed to take in order to do well in her coursework. Instead, when Ashley did not receive the answers she desired, she questioned if she was in the right program. Ashley's frustration with the way she was being asked to approach the learning process led her to seek out and appreciate the support she received through the more structured environment of her assistantship, one-on-one meetings her supervisor, the opportunity to select her own classes, and the experiences her peers shared in the classroom. Self-reflection, as well as being challenged to consider others' perspectives, challenged Ashley to find a new way of approaching her experiences. Eventually Ashley stopped looking to others around her for answers, and began applying what she had learned in the classroom to her

practice for herself. Ashley gained confidence in this new approach to making meaning through a successful summer internship and by winning a case study. By the time Ashley had completed the program, she felt a responsibility to be intentional in the work that she did and recognized that she would be continually learning as a new professional.

David

David was a first-generation college student who went to college near his home after being recruited by a coach. While an undergraduate student, David majored in computer science before switching to biology. In addition to being a student athlete, David joined a fraternity and took advantage of several leadership opportunities through his fraternity. David enjoyed his fraternal experiences so much that upon graduation David worked for two years as a leadership consultant traveling throughout the Midwest visiting different chapters. While serving as a leadership consultant his interest in pursuing a career using his undergraduate science degree faded, as he realized he enjoyed working with people. His mentor, a fraternity brother and a student affairs professional, encouraged him to obtain his master's degree from [name of student affairs preparation program], the institution where his mentor served as a student affairs professional.

When asked to speak more about what it was that he specifically liked about working with people, David shared that he liked the energy of working with them, and the new ideas that were shared:

My work revolved around leadership, so I think just the energy of the students and sharing fresh ideas and people getting excited about stuff that I was working on is what really drew me in. What was the question again?

Okay, yeah, so again the energy again, I think is the big one and the fresh ideas, like I said. What made me switch or decide my enjoyment in working with people I guess I just never really had it, so it wasn't like I didn't like it before, it is just that I had never really had an experience where I was always working in that setting. I wasn't an RA; I wasn't overly involved in my undergraduate experience. I did the sport thing, I did the Greek thing and definitely enjoyed both of those experiences, but didn't really work with big groups of people, it was always, in science and computers, pretty solitary endeavors and just...when I took the position with my fraternity, I was working with people all of the time and that was my job and it was just...I enjoyed it. Like I said, the energy and the excitement of students was particularly what I liked about it.

David did not believe he could find a job with his biology degree where he would work with college students as he did as a consultant, so he chose to pursue a degree that would allow him the opportunity to continue to do what he enjoyed.

A Solo Approach

David's ability to recognize that he was entering a more interactive field did not translate into what he anticipated his interactions with others would be like while in graduate school. Instead, David was preparing for his graduate school experience

to be more of a solo experience, despite his understanding that the program would help connect those within it to each other:

You know I expected to meet people and make friends, but some of the people that I have come away with are some of my best friends now. I didn't quite expect that. I figured everyone would be into their own little world and not put too much effort into meeting others, but that was a focus of at least the [name of student affairs preparation program] program. They made an effort to connect us in a social way as much as they did.

David's anticipation that his experience in graduate school would be more of a solo effort resonated with his preferred work style. David tended to handle issues on his own and found support in a few individuals when desired:

I guess I've always been a bit of a solitary individual and appreciated working on things by myself and...but as far as...I mean for me, I just, I just try to think of what I used to support. I think really diving into things and getting myself super busy is how I keep myself focused. I had a significant relationship and getting engaged and married, well that was probably my primary support and contact. Otherwise, I think my tendency is to figure things out on my own for class work and editing papers and stuff. When things were formally organized I would go to paper editing sessions but I didn't have necessarily a buddy or a relationship with anyone in the program where I would go and we would exchange papers and look at each other's papers. I guess at work I had my supervisor who I would bounce questions off quite a bit, but there again, I think I was mostly...I would figure things

out. If there was a primary or a number one support person that I had it was my significant other. It was my romantic relationship.

Consistent with the solo approach he took with the experiences he had while in the student affairs preparation program, David set his own personal goal for the program, and came close to reaching it:

In undergraduate, I didn't pay as much attention as I could have. I got decent grades but I walked out of [name of grad prep program] getting nearly a 4.0, I got one B. It was one of the last classes too the last semester, but I was really proud of that because I worked hard at it, and it was a goal that I had coming in, so I was very proud of that.

Selecting a Student Affairs Preparation Program and Assistantship

David applied to four student affairs preparation programs all of which were in [name of state]. His decision to apply to programs within [name of state] was due to the significant relationship he was in and his belief that he, "needed to be within driving distance." Although David interviewed at only two institutions, including the one he eventually attended, he was offered admission and assistantships to three institutions. When asked to clarify further how he ended up choosing the program he did, David indicated that familiarity and practicality, and not having to pay for housing or a meal plan, played a role in helping him decide:

Yeah, well it was...I am first-generation, so it was still an interesting and new experience for me. My parents helped a little bit with the application to [name of undergraduate institution], but the coach and team were a great sense of support, or source of support I should say, and helped me with the application

and figuring that out, so I wasn't too in charge of applying back then. But I had been for graduate school. I guess what led me to go to [name of student affairs preparation program] over, I got in at [name of student affairs preparation program] and [name of student affairs preparation program], not at [name of student affairs preparation program] I think it was the ability to live-in, and continue working with Greeks but not as my main role. I wanted to branch out and do something new. The Greek experience has been important and valuable to me, so I wanted to continue to give back, and that also meant that financially it was a much better deal and not having to pay for housing and getting the meal plan as well.

David was familiar not only with working with Greeks, but also the campus of the program he attended because of his consultant position:

I visited [name of institution] twice in '07 and twice in '08 in a working capacity, so I had seen the campus and met quite a few of the students and seen quite a few of the activities on campus. So, I had a really good picture of [name of institution] before I even knew that I was going to be applying and going to grad school there. That actual visit to learn about [name of student affairs preparation program] and the informational visit, I was actually doing a visit for work at the same time, so in between working with the chapter and the fraternity men, I would run to different informational sessions and then I would run back and meet with officers and then would run back to different informational sessions, but overall, it was a good experience. I tend to like those things and I don't get bored at them or anything. Most of it was actually

eye opening...especially as I had been to the campus several times before I got to see the academic side which I had not seen before, and I got to visit with the grad students and some of the faculty members.

David's choice to use familiarity, in this case being a White fraternity man, as a part of his decision making process he described as comforting:

I believe that I continued my work with fraternities throughout the program because I was comfortable with it and knew that I would excel in that area (meaning that I could impact others in a positive manner). Part of my comfort with fraternities is definitely connected to the fact that they are comprised of males and predominately White males (two identities that I easily and obviously associate with). I do not believe that I made the decision to continue to work with fraternities for that reason, but I do believe that I was influenced for that reason. I felt a sense of comfort and support when working with fraternities, because it was/is familiar.

Thus, it is not surprising to find familiarity as a part of David's rationale for his assistantship choice:

I'm first-generation. You know reading through all of the different [assistantship] positions and trying to learn about them and you see this first-generation popping up, and I was thinking I could help this population and so you know helping someone whose experience was similar to my own, so you know a connection to the group. I didn't know much about it, but I knew that there was one, and learning more about that would help me learn more about

myself and then also help others that are like me. I think that is what really drew me in.

Although David recognized that he would be working with undergraduate students who, like himself, were first-generation, he had not given thought to the possibility that there would be differences between himself and the students with which he worked. David found himself surprised by those he was working with in his assistantship:

So it was a major curve for me because most of the students serviced by the [first-generation student] office were minority students and actually I was one of the few males and men on the staff, so I was actually out of my element and that was great for me. As far as learning the position and my duties that was, I didn't really get much just kind of piles of paper and not the best orientation but very supportive staff and very helping staff, so I was able to make it work, but it took awhile to get on my feet and figure out what I was supposed to be doing and what needed to be done.

Despite David's feeling as though he had been thrown a "major curve," he described the curve as something that was "great" for him. This approach and attitude toward surprises, where he would anticipate one thing (e.g., a competitive environment), but found something else (e.g., meaningful relationships that helped him to learn and grow) and enjoyed it was consistent throughout David's experience:

I guess the surprise behind the relationships at [name of student affairs preparation program] were because I came in expecting everyone to focus on their academics and maybe I was expecting a competitive environment or a

political environment where maybe I wasn't too interested in getting involved. What I would say though is that there are probably more similarities than anything else. I think as I learned and adjusted to the culture of [name of student affairs preparation program] I think a lot of my expectations or assumptions weren't true, that it was just as easy to make friends or develop relationships as anything. I think the one difference between a lot of my relationships with people at [name of student affairs preparation program] would be that these are people that are working in the same field as I am, so you know I can talk to them as a friend, but also as a professional and other things that I'm interested in. I think a lot of my relationships before [name of student affairs preparation program] just focused on social or maybe a professional aspect. The people were in the business world or fields that are not similar to my own so I think overall it is a very...there was a lot of similarities and not much difference, but I think the one big difference is the similarity of the interest and the similarity of the knowledge base.

Self-Reflection

David's thoughts about going into the program were also based on the abilities and skills he knew he had acquired as an undergraduate student, as well as the unknown. David did not know what to expect in a master's program except that he knew that it would be difficult, and that he could handle it:

I didn't have too many expectations. I knew it would be difficult. That I would be tested academically, intellectually that I would be stretched, I guess I didn't know exactly what to expect at the same time. I knew that my

experience at [name of undergraduate institution] was a good one and that I had learned how to write really well and that they had taught me a lot there, but as far as expectations for the program at [name of institution]? I knew that I would be reading and writing like I never had, but I was confident that I could handle it.

David's approach to entering the program was developed through his reflection on what others told him the program demanded, thereby not finding himself completely surprised once in the program:

I think just talking to people you meet during the visit and meeting the students in the program. That is what everyone mentions right away. When you ask what the difference is they say, "well you read and you write more." I knew that the classes would be small, but that was something I was used to and I was excited about. And I knew that they were going to be discussion based again, I was excited about that...that was something I looked forward to.

Once in the classroom, David continued the same method of thinking in terms of connecting the new information he was receiving to his past experiences through reflection in order to make meaning of the new information. For example, David spoke highly about how the work that he did as a consultant was very helpful in understanding what he was learning because it allowed him to share real examples based on his previous experiences:

Yeah, I don't know if you will touch on this at some point, what was really significant for me was that working experience before going to grad school.

So those two years of working with fraternities across the Midwest really gave me a nice context or experience to speak from and to reflect upon in my course work.

For David, his past work experience provided him with contexts to which he could relate to and evaluate what he was reading:

I think just the practical side of it. We were in class talking about advising student organizations and the three, four people that have done it can say you know oh yeah that is why that didn't work or that's why or that's something I could do in the future, or that's why that worked so well for me. Now, whereas the other 9-10 people who came straight from undergrad are, 'oh I can use that or I will use that.' It is just a difference between being able to reflect on an experience and see where you went wrong or where you went right as compared to just reading from a book and thinking that you will do it in the future.

David's ability to draw on his past experience also gave him a greater focus:

I did so many things in that experience [being a leadership consultant] that we talked about in class. It just provided me with this wonderful experience to draw from and explain the theories and ideas that we were talking about in class. You know I was an advisor to multiple, multiple students groups and identity development and these types of risk management crisis, so it was just...we would read it in the book and it was just like, oh yeah that happened to me. Oh yeah, I did that and it just gave everything a great context. And it was...not being a very visual person, I can't read a theory and then imagine

how it would work or how it would look, but having had so many experiences that I could make the connection to was just really, really beneficial. It is not to say that it was not worthwhile to not have worked. It just seemed to be so much more beneficial and it helped me be focused, or it helped focus me too, so I knew how I could use the information that I was learning and you know I thought about where I would use it in the future. It was great to look back and pull from my experiences and then it also helped to direct my thinking then into the future too.

The process of self-reflection, which was required through the coursework, in addition to being an activity in which David engaged, was an underlying activity that helped David make meaning of his graduate school experiences throughout his time in the preparation program. David identified that he learned to become more intentional with the work that he did through the process of self-reflection. For example, teaching first-generation students made David reflect on his own experiences as a first-generation student:

I had gotten into school and I was able to figure it out and never was really aware of any disadvantages that I was at as a first-generation student, but then you know in talking about them, and then reflecting back on my own experience, and talking about them in class and then reflecting back, I was able to see, okay maybe if I were to have some help there or yeah I didn't understand that, or things like that, I guess the impact for me was through reflection, as I learned things and I could look at my own experience and I could look at that. How that impacted my actions at [name of prep program]?

I would say it definitely allowed me in my assistantship to more consciously connect with the students because that was the population that I worked with...first-generation college students or students from disadvantaged populations or demographics, so it allowed me to be a little bit more intentional and to consciously connect their experience with mine because I was able to know what they were going through instead of just why and we had that shared experience.

David credits the reflective nature of his graduate school experiences for helping him become more intentional as a practitioner:

I mentioned that I am a more intentional practitioner as a result of the program. This leads into why I think of myself as more intentional after going through the program and is probably a good question to answer for you.

Through the practical experiences of the program, the assistantship and practicum's for example, I gained many different practical experiences, but the reflective nature of the program, as well as the focus on academics are what really helped me glean meaning from those experiences. They helped me see how to apply knowledge as well as how not to apply it. I know what works, what doesn't, what may, what may not, and where I can/cannot take risks. As a consequence, I am now a much more thoughtful and intentional professional. The skill behind being intentional is really anything more than knowing where and how to exert effort.

Practical Application

David's ability to connect what he was learning to his past experiences through reflection in order to make meaning was similar to his interest in having experiences that would allow him to apply what he was learning while he was in graduate school:

I think sometimes in the classes we would do these projects... pick a program or make up a program and think about how you would improve it. It seemed to me often that we could have easily picked an established program. Or used our projects to improve [name of institution]. That was just a graded assignment. That was a more practical application of what was going on in the classroom. If you are going to do a project about improving programs, why not pick a program that exists? And be able to walk away and experience improving an actual program instead of just an abstract idea?

Using the latitude he was given in his assistantship allowed him to take what he was learning in the classroom and apply it to his assistantship experience. This freedom led to appreciating greatly his assistantship experience, as it allowed him another method for make meaning of what he was learning:

Yeah, I think the freedom I was...in particular I think the freedom that I was given was what was so significant. So I was able to try out thing and do new things, and the freedom I had in the position allowed me to use classroom material in practice, so that was very beneficial too.

This practical application of what he was learning in the classroom, along with new experiences, is what also made his practicum at the community college so powerful to David:

Why I liked it the best was because I learned so much and it was such a unique experience and it introduced me into a world, an area that I didn't even know existed. You know, international students at community colleges, who would know? So, I think it was just brand new territory so everything that I did it was a learning moment for me. And then also it was just what I did, to go back to that whole idea of doing things that are practical and that are actually being used, that was very much the case in the practicum. Everything that I did had a purpose and they used me as a staff member and they appreciated everything that I did, so just seeing an immediate impact and then learning about stuff and learning stuff every day, I think those things combined to make it the experience that I consider my best.

Evaluating New Experiences

Determining what new experiences to have was something that David struggled with, although it did not prevent him from having such experiences. Part of David's struggle with new opportunities was due to his desire for practical application. The opportunities David had through the preparation program requirements to take what he was learning and put it into practice made it difficult for him to narrow down his interests:

Yeah, well I guess what is at the root of it for me is how can I know what I like or not unless I have tried it and done it, so that becomes a problem with

prioritizing. When you take that perspective when you have to try something to realize if you like it or not that means you are trying everything. Grad school there is only so much time to be trying everything that you can. So, you might say that I had problems prioritizing...I would be an advisor to this group, I would be a live in director, I would help with a certificate program on the side, and that was all good and I learned a ton from all of it, and I even learned about time management and prioritizing, but it has been a little difficult for me and was difficult, how do you pick what is the most important and the most useful considering that there is only so many hours in the day? Since David, himself, was not always able to determine what experiences he should pursue, he had to develop a means for making such decisions. A method that David used was to reach out to his mentor:

You know he would encourage me to do things that stretched me and challenged me and then he was often there to support me. And like I said I had met him before [name of student affairs preparation program] and I still know him and stay in pretty frequent contact with him. He was very significant. I would talk to him about 10 different things and he might help that process of elimination and he might remove three or four of the ten things and recommend I do two or three of them over the others, so he was definitely present...definitely the very definition of mentor.

David appreciated the advice his mentor gave him, as it helped him to determine which experiences he should select while in the program.

Part of David's difficulty in narrowing down his interests, beyond being able to take what he was learning and put it into practice, was that he enjoyed and was comfortable having experiences that caused him to be challenged outside of his comfort zone. As a part of his assistantship, David had to teach a course to an all female, inner city group of students. This was a new experience for him:

First, I was teaching in a formal capacity, so I had to learn the material...civic engagement was the topic, we did a lot stuff around civic engagement, so I had to learn about that topic, and then present on it and teach it, to recruit students for the class, and learn this federal program, Midwest Campus Compact Citizen Scholars program and the in's and out's so all of that was new to me. Teaching was kind of something that always appealed to me and I had facilitated and presented to tons of groups when I was a consultant, but teaching had a different ring to it, so that was definitely something that pushed me out of my comfort zone. Then, an unexpected...something that put me out of my comfort zone unexpectedly was it wound up that for whatever reason all of the people in the class were women. Up until that point my experience had been fraternities, they are all guys, all but most of the organizations and groups I had been a part of where athletically based through high school and college, so it is not like I had never interacted or known any women, but not in a formal setting, so that was very different for me, but wonderful, wonderful learning experience. And then again, not only were they women, but a majority were minority and inner city, so having been raised in a fairly rural setting, issues that some of these students were dealing with were very foreign

to me. I had one of my students become pregnant, and had to drop out of the program, not that that didn't happen in a rural setting, but things like that that popped up for these inner city people were things I had to learn about, so quite a few different things, that is for sure.

In fact, David admitted to purposefully seeking out experiences from which he knew he would grow:

But then other experiences like my assistantship or certain classes that I purposefully took because I knew they would challenge me and they were something that I wanted to improve about myself or an experience that I didn't have that would be beneficial.

A different academic experience that David purposefully sought believing that it would challenge him was to earn a certificate in organizational change. This certificate was offered through the business school and required David take more classes than his peers:

In addition to the master's in college student personnel I earned a certificate in organizational change. In my first semester [name of professor], I kept asking questions in a class about individuals, I kept asking questions about groups and larger organizations and she connected me with this certificate and said you know if you can handle a couple of extra classes with a little bit more of a workload you can earn this certificate for free while you are enrolled as a master's students, so I did that. It was five courses.

David's pursuit of the certificate in organizational change stemmed from his ability to look at the information he was learning from more than one perspective, and his comfort in asking questions in order to improve the experiences of students:

I was just asking these questions because that is kind of what interested me. So you know we are talking about how you can help a student, and I would say yeah but how can the University afford to take care of if you have 10,000 students and a hundred of them are having this problem then you need another dedicated staff and that's additional resources and the professor would say that is a great question [David], but that's kind of not what we are talking about right now, you might check out these classes because they will help you answer that question.

David was also able to see and evaluate the differences between himself and his peers. Specifically, David became best friends with another graduate student and recognized the differences between himself and his best friend. This graduate student best friend was a Black male and David's previous relationships had tended to be with White males:

Well, I would say the person I walked away with being who I consider being my best friend out of the program was a Black male. Up until my graduate experience I had lived in [name of state] which was predominately White. My university was diverse enough but my fraternity wasn't, my experience working as a consultant in a fraternity there is some diversity sprinkled in there, but predominately White so, this individual, this man and I just

connected and it was just great to make a connection, to make a friend with someone very different than myself.

David also recognized and appreciated the experiences he had learning from his female coworkers:

Even just working with and learning from working with women that helped having been an athlete throughout high school I learned to work with men, and then the fraternity is obviously working with men. But getting into the grad program and getting into working with people I had never worked with but definitely working with much more real world then working with only White males, so those relationships with people that were very different then myself were significant.

Rather than become concerned that he was different than others around him, David embraced the differences and viewed his new relationships as opportunities for his own personal growth.

Movement Toward Action

David's experience with difference began to become beliefs he wanted to act upon, and he began to see opportunities to do so. One opportunity occurred when he was visiting his home. David grew up in a predominantly White environment. The master's program allowed him to connect with individuals of different races and these experiences with different races were profound to David:

I think just being able to look at, you know I, I consider myself lucky in how I was raised in that stereotypes and racial profiling was not a part of my upbringing, but no matter how well you are raised if it is in a silo of White

people it is...you know, there is still a sense of other or that person is very different from me, so it is just that relationship has allowed me to form a connection with a people that I hadn't had any experience with before, so I guess just removing kind of this sense of mystery from a group of people and bringing me out of my world perspective.

David's experience with his close friend became a part of David such that even when he was not around his friend he still thought about their differences and his beliefs about them. David became what he identified as an advocate:

I think my ah ha moment would be when I went home and you know talking with friends and just someone making a remark just me thinking in my head you can't make a racist comment. Thinking of this friend that I have and thinking to myself you can't make that statement, you can't make these blanket stereotype statements. And I think that is when, for me it was like oh wow I have friends different then me and now I want to advocate for him and he isn't even here.

David's realization that his friends were making racist comments and that he was not amenable to that caused David to want to speak up. For David, his desire to "want to advocate" for his friend was profound since his friend was not present, but rather it was something he wanted to do. David's experiences with those who were different challenged him and he grew from those experiences:

I went in thinking and knowing that it [David's assistantship site] would be a challenge for a couple of reasons. Knowing that I would be teaching, I knew that would be challenged managing a program in a way that I had not and I

knew that would be challenging. I don't think the big part and the unexpected part for me was the demographics of the students. You know I expected a perfectly mixed class of probably males and females, and you know I had an all female class of mostly inner city, a lot of Latinas and African-Americans and it was just...not that I was...it was just kind of something that I didn't expect. It was a bit of a challenge and learning curve for me and it was something that I think really that is where I talked earlier about my worldview or opening my eyes or improving my perspective and moving into that advocate role and I think that is where that really started. It was a very practical experience and I made mistakes in the beginning but slowly learned what worked and what didn't. But it was a bit challenging just because it was something I had never experienced before or worked with so I expected challenges in that role, but not those challenges...they were probably some of...it led to some of the best or most growth for me personally.

Interacting with people who were different made David want to be an advocate for others. The program gave David the tools to do so:

I would say that I'm more open minded or I have an improved world view and then it kind of goes along with that, but I would look at it as something separate. I am more of an advocate for others now than I was before the program, so just my worldview improved from so many different things I wouldn't even know, but a couple of examples...my friendship with the Black male that we talked about, but really my friendship with a whole variety of people that changed my opinion that helped me to get rid of stereotypes, my

experience abroad where I traveled through Europe...that opened my eyes and removed stereotypes and helped me to look at the world differently and in a better way. And then I also think, or the other way, or the other difference or change...advocating...and I got that from class and different experiences and even in my assistantship just going from being more open to wanting to fix the problem and finding some ways to support different groups, different people, it wasn't something that I didn't care about before, but I guess I didn't see how I could fit in or make any change, but the program definitely gave me...I guess the tools, or just helped me realize that I can support and advocate for other people and it is my duty to do so.

David graduated from the program not only with an improved worldview, but he recognized how he could participate in advocating for others, and saw it as his duty. Prior to participating in the student affairs preparation program David was not able to see opportunities to be a change agent for others. He came to understand how he could make change through his interactions with others during his time in the program, as well as through classes and his assistantship where he was exposed to a variety of perspectives. Observing and listening to others who were different was also helpful to David's understanding how to be an advocate:

Yeah, so I think I shared that I picked things up in class and then it is just observing others and how other people advocate and support for whatever group it parallels and get ideas from just watching others.

Identifying as a Professional

The meaning David made of his student affairs preparation program experiences allowed David to see himself as a professional after graduation:

I think the first thing that jumps to mind is that it has shaped me and helped me to think of myself as a professional and a student affairs professional specifically. I think before getting into the program it was a field that I wanted to get into and I had some experience in, but I didn't think of myself as being in the field or being a professional...a professional student affairs person, so that would be the big one...it gave me a perspective of a professional, and I'm a confident in my abilities and my experience.

David gained confidence in his abilities as a professional, attributing his confidence to his experiences in the program:

I would say a professional in student affairs is one who is knowledgeable about what topics are being discussed and knows different theories, practices...best practices...different tools to use in the profession and knows where to find those tools or has those tools and they are ready. I think the experience part of it too in terms of having done a lot of the stuff and applied the different theories and using the different ideas and making use of the resources and different professional organizations and stuff like that...knowing what is available and making use of what is available and then also holding yourself to a certain set of standards or expectations that are held by the larger group.

Today, as a professional, David finds himself continuing to connect his current experiences to his past experiences, as well as to the knowledge that he learned, just as he did during graduate school:

Well, one thing that just pops in my head because it is something I have been dealing with lately and it is about an experience I had in my first year. I had a resident that had [name of disorder] and I didn't know it for quite awhile because it wasn't something that he disclosed...but helicopter parents, I somehow got on the radar of his mother and she called me and would call me and it was just a unique experience working with him and learning about that and then also really working with an over, probably over-involved parent and then not thinking I will ever use this experience, but sure enough one of my current residents is an [name of disorder] person, so it is just crazy how you have an experience and you don't know where it will come in handy or how it fits in the big part of what you do.

Although David was able to connect experiences he was having as a new professional to experiences he had while in the preparation program, that is not the only approach David brought into his new professional environment. David had become more intentional and reflective throughout his time in the student affairs preparation program, traits that have become a part of who he is as a professional, and help him make meaning of his current experiences:

I would say I think a bit more before I do things. I reflect more deeply on activities and interactions so it's just being more prepared and then on the back end thinking about how to improve and be better in the future. So, in my

day-to-day activities I will set aside five minutes before and after I do something to think about how I am going to approach it, what would be the best way to approach it, and then afterwards think about what went well, what I could improve. Always trying to connect that back to what I learned in the program.

I am more intentional in my work. I know that is for sure. Like when I'm developing a program or doing something with students I try to think back to what I learned in the classroom and pour through my books and notes and see if I can find something to help that interaction with the student or enhance the program or whatever it might be so definitely more intentional.

Connecting to Past Experiences

The experiences David acquired while serving as a fraternity consultant were a constant point of reference for David as he worked to make meaning of what he was being taught in the preparation program. David entered the program confident of the skills and abilities he brought with him, taking a more solo approach, knowing that he would be pushed intellectually. David's process of connecting what he was learning through self-reflection to his past experiences led him to prefer more practical applications in the classroom, and to value his assistantship where he was given the freedom to put into practice the theories he was learning about in class. David did struggle with determining which new experiences he should have, and often turned to his mentor for advice. David's attraction to new experiences was due to his awareness that he had potential to grow and learn himself. This caused David to want to be intentional with the choices he made in the program. David's attraction to new

experiences was also the reason why David's relationships with others who were different were so significant. Experience with difference led David to begin internalize beliefs that he wanted to act upon, which he observed in others who were advocates. Today, David identifies as a professional who strives intentionally to put theory into practice, and continues to connect his current experiences to what he learned from those in his past.

Environmental Conditions

Each of the narratives tells the story of how and what meaning six graduate students made of their experiences within a student affairs preparation program. Through a variety of experiences, each participant reached unique understandings. For some, the experiences were so challenging that they questioned dropping out of the program. For others, any challenges brought on by experiences were overcome by simple adjustments to one's approach or were intentionally sought out with anticipation. Still, some experiences led the participants to alter the how they made meaning, and it is these experiences that will be discussed in this section.

What are identified in this section as environmental conditions are the experiences that surfaced with some consistency across all of the narratives, which seemed to connect the student affairs preparation program environment to the meaning making process of the participants in such a way that the participants were encouraged to adopt a new way of understanding. The environmental conditions presented in this section are shared with caution as they both make simpler and more difficult how meaning was made within and among the individual narratives. Included

are conditions that appeared to provide support to the participants as they experienced transition in how they made meaning. Also included are the conditions that contributed to the participants' choosing to enter the program, as those conditions are what led to the participants' journey within the student affairs preparation program.

Self-Reflection

The experience of self-reflection was brought to the preparation program environment in two ways: through the coursework and by participants. A majority of the participants spoke about how they were asked to participate in self-reflection through their coursework, as well as how they used self-reflection to make meaning. For three of the participants, Anne, Ashley, and Brandon, being asked to self-reflect appeared to create dissonance between how they wanted to approach their coursework and the approach they were asked to take, and it was through the dissonance that development of their meaning making structures seemed to occur.

Through coursework composed of self-reflection activities, Anne was asked to share her feelings and struggles, yet Anne could not figure out why her professors would care about her feelings and wanted to hear about the struggles she was experiencing. Furthermore, she could not understand how her professors would grade her feelings and struggles if she did share them. To Anne, being a student meant being asked to think intellectually. Being asked to think in such a reflective manner was not intellectual and therefore not worthy of her time. Anne struggled to understand exactly what her professors were looking for in her perspective, and found the experience of determining for herself her own perspective to be counterintuitive to

her undergraduate experience. Still, for Anne to be successful in her coursework, which she determined through the letter grades she received, Anne had to adjust how she made meaning and begin to share her own reflections of her experiences. Anne identified this change as a shift in her attitude, and was something of which she was proud. For Anne, the new approach included considering others' perspectives as a way to evaluate what she had previously believed to be true. So, for example, when a close friend of Anne's disclosed how her Christian beliefs would normally cause her to interact with Anne, Anne, who had previously believed herself to be open-minded, reflected on her response to what her friend shared and questioned if she was truly open-minded.

Ashley also struggled with the self-reflection activities she was assigned in class and questioned how such assignments would be graded. Ashley did not think that her own opinion, which is all that she thought self-reflection was, could be judged as right or wrong by another because it belonged to her. Ashley wanted to be able to write about what she saw occurring around her (e.g., suicidal ideation and layoffs) and did not want to develop her own understanding of what was occurring based on her own evaluation of what she saw. Yet, this is precisely what Ashley was being asked to do. Ashley also wanted there to be an answer, or a solution, that she could apply to the many, high-stress experiences she was having in her assistantship. She found it very frustrating that her professors were not teaching her the information she needed in the classroom, and instead were challenging her to consider theoretical findings and others' perspectives. For Ashley, there was a disconnect in her ability to make meaning between what she was learning in the classroom and what she felt she

needed to be successful in her assistantship. Ashley was unable to evaluate for herself the theory she was reading for her classes and other perspectives she was asked to adopt without significant struggle, and this led her to question if she was in the correct graduate program.

Ashley's response to the challenge that she felt from self-reflection was to seek out environments that provided more structure. She did this by selecting a class that she thought would be more "tasky," and by opening up to her supervisor during their one-on-one meetings. It was there, in her assistantship, that Ashley began to understand how to take what she was learning in the classroom and put it into practice. She began to see how theory could assist her in understanding her students, and began to come, "to terms with the gray." By being asked to participate in self-reflection, Ashley was challenged to let go of her desire to seek answers for what she should think and do in her practice from her external environment, and was challenged to begin determining for herself the approach she would take in her practice.

Brandon's struggle with the self-reflective activities he was asked to participate in through coursework was due to his self-identified "groupthink" mentality. Although Brandon originally thought his groupthink way of making meaning would dissipate on its own, he came to understand that this was not happening. At the beginning of the preparation program, Brandon was still calling home to consult with his friends from his undergraduate experience in order to determine his thoughts and what he should be doing, and through this came to understand that it would take effort on his part to move out of groupthink. Brandon

was also accustomed to receiving a high level of attention as a student leader while he was an undergraduate student. Shifting to a role where he was not the one receiving the attention was a part of what made doing any self-reflection activities difficult. The self-reflection activities assigned in the preparation program often required Brandon to think from the perspective of another individual, or theory, while maintaining his own perspective, which was an ability that Brandon had not developed when he began the preparation program. As Brandon came to develop his own perspective he began to learn the “real reasons,” or rather his own reasons, behind the decisions he made.

The process of self-reflection that the participants were required to participate in during the program, although a struggle in the beginning as illustrated by Anne, Ashley, and Brandon, eventually became a helpful tool for making meaning of what they were learning. Ashley found that the self-reflection she was required to do helped her to understand others’ points of view. It required her to, “figure out how to divide [Ashley] from this persona” that she had developed, making it so that separating her perspective from others’ became a part of how she made meaning. Brandon found the monthly journaling he was required to do to be helpful in his understanding of student leadership, “and how it is not about creating an army of [Brandon]’s, but it is about helping cultivate them as leaders in general.” Just like Ashley, Brandon was learning to separate his perspective from the perspectives of others’ around him. For Anne, self-reflection was a process she appeared to use in order to hear others’ perspectives, which helped her to begin questioning how she was engaging with the world around her. David also spoke to the process of self-

reflection and how it helped him to “glean” meaning from the experiences he was having in the student affairs preparation program. For example, David shared that he learned more about himself as a first-generation college student by reflecting on what he was learning in class as well as through his assistantship. The process of self-reflection helped David to consider others’ perspectives while helping him to clarify his own meaning. By the time Anne, Ashley, Brandon, and David had graduated, engaging in self-reflection had assisted them in not only making meaning, but also developing how they made meaning.

Experiencing Different Perspectives

Many of the participants spoke about experiencing relationships with others who were different in thoughts, identity, and/or experiences. Often the participants shared that they had not previously had an opportunity that they were aware of to engage with others who were different making it so that they were having new experiences. The participants also shared that they learned about themselves through these relationships and that what they learned had become a part of how they interacted with and made meaning of their experiences.

For Anne, experiencing relationships with others who were different meant feeling frustration that her peers and the students she worked with did not hold the same beliefs and come to the same conclusions that she did. She entered the program understanding herself to be sensitive, and came to learn that her peers viewed her as firm. Anne, at first, attributed this difference in viewpoints to her assistantship experiences, where she believed that she was making decisions that directly impacted students’ persistence at the institution and that her peers were not. Anne did not

consider the perspective of her peers and instead sought an external reason as justification for why she was being viewed as firm: it was not her, it was her assistantship that caused her to be firm. This same way of making meaning of difference occurred for Anne upon finding out that her peers did not view large, research institutions the same way that she did. She could not understand the perspective of her peers. To Anne, working at a large, state institution fulfilled the purpose of student affairs because at these types of institutions, she believed, was where students were treated most like numbers in the classroom. Anne also struggled in her assistantship connecting to students who did not attend school out-of-state and seemed focused on the vocation they would acquire after graduation, rather than obtaining a degree for the sake of learning and exploration as she had done.

In each of these experiences it seemed that Anne cared about others' opinions being different than her own because those different opinions might affect how others perceived her, which could have consequences for her. Anne also appeared to be following external beliefs that she brought with her from her undergraduate experience. Anne's beliefs were characterized by her choosing to go to an out-of-state, large, well-known state institution, where her role was as the more caring person amongst her peers, and she was able to focus on exploring and learning new information. Through these beliefs Anne felt she was independent and it led her to succeed as an undergraduate, which she defined as graduating with a high grade point average. Thus, Anne was frustrated to find out that her peers, and the students she worked with did not have the same beliefs, but rather instead had different perspectives, and she judged them negatively for that. Eventually, the frustration

Anne experienced by others around her holding different perspectives seemed to help Anne arrive at a place where she realized the beliefs she was following were no longer working and she began considering others' perspectives and what they might mean for her.

The relationships Ashley had with others who were different also concerned her peers, however Ashley's concern about not fitting in with her peers was different than Anne's. Ashley was concerned that she did not have the same undergraduate experience her peers did and this left her feeling like an outsider. Ashley did not want to stick out from her peers and that included her past experiences. Even the professional experience she acquired prior to participating in the student affairs preparation program left her feeling "odd." Ashley's desire to fit in with her peers was so great that she would sometimes hold back sharing her thoughts in class for fear that her peers, and in particular her co-workers, would disagree. Ashley believed her peers had better experiences from their undergraduate institutions to draw from than she did, and that by not having such experiences she was not as qualified. Frustrated, Ashley considered switching classes so that she would not have to deal with that dynamic. Instead, Ashley began to internally determine for herself if she was qualified to be a student affairs professional. For example, she began to use her past experiences to help her connect to students and trying to understand her students' behavior through the use of theory. This shift allowed Ashley to let go of continually comparing herself to her peers.

Brandon's relationships with people who were different came as a surprise to him. Brandon first experienced a different perspective on what it meant to be Black

from a faculty member. Until this point, Brandon had assumed that because he was also Black he would form an instant connection others who were Black, which included the professor. When a connection was not easily established, Brandon struggled to make sense of why and questioned if how he saw his Black identity was wrong. Brandon also experienced a different perspective through a relationship he had with a RA. Brandon saw a lot of himself in this RA, and therefore assumed she would want to go into student affairs. It seemed to be this relationship that caused Brandon to pause and realize that it was acceptable for others to not have the same beliefs and come to the same conclusions that he did. A final relationship that provided a different perspective to Brandon was that which he had with the vice president at his assistantship institution. Although Brandon had come to believe that it was okay for others to have different perspectives than he did, he really felt challenged in that belief when it came to a co-worker's having what Brandon considered to be an inappropriate relationship. Brandon's vice president did not view his co-worker's relationship the same way that Brandon did, and although it took a few days, Brandon eventually reached a place where he accepted the vice president having a different opinion.

For Micah, experiencing relationships with others who were different resulted in his feeling accused of contributing to a peer's arrest and choosing to confront co-workers who were making decisions with which he disagreed. Micah inferred by being asked to meet with a faculty member, as well as sit through a lecture in a group class about alcohol, that he was being accused of causing his peer to get arrested. Such accusation frustrated Micah. It seemed he could not see that the relationship he

was in with his peers was reciprocal and that he had some responsibility in one of his peer's arrest. Instead Micah appeared to avoid considering his role in the incident by denying any responsibility, and responded by choosing to not socialize with peers with which he disagreed. Micah's choice to avoid situations with his peers that might be controversial lasted only until his second year in the program when found himself being asked by another graduate student to confront their co-workers. This time, Micah approached his involvement with greater responsibility. He considered his own thoughts about the situation while attempting to understand the perspective of his co-workers, identifying what his role and responsibility was in the situation and following through in fulfilling them. Reaching out to his co-workers to share his own thoughts, which were different than his co-workers, was not easy for Micah. He could anticipate that it would cause tension, which he disliked, however he felt strongly that he had an obligation to speak up. Micah continues to believe he has an obligation to reach out to others even when it means disagreeing, and recognizes that he probably should have spoken up more while he was in the preparation program, but he is still concerned that he will cause others to become defensive.

David's relationships with individuals who were different came from both his assistantship as well as a close Black male friend. Until David entered the preparation program his experiences with others had primarily been with White men. Upon accepting his assistantship, David suddenly found himself being one of only a few men in the office, and also being the only White man in the classroom. Although David had not anticipated this dynamic, he embraced it by using it as an opportunity to learn more about how he could connect, support, and work with others who were

different. David seemed to become aware of the impact his relationships with others who were different were having on him, in particular his close Black, male friend, when he went home and witnessed his hometown friends telling racist jokes. David did not need his friend with him to know that the jokes were wrong, rather he came to that conclusion internally. This experience, determining internally for himself that what his friends were saying was wrong, began helping David see his role in advocating for others, which was a role that he was previously unable to see.

Finding Support

Although both self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives surfaced as conditions that promoted the development of how the participants made meaning of their student affairs experiences, there were also conditions that arose through which the participants found support. The participants seemed to seek out support when they were being challenged to change how they made meaning, while they were changing how they made meaning, as well as after they made changes to how they made meaning. The support sought appeared to bring the participants comfort and sometimes led to greater confidence.

Pursuing personal academic interests. One source of support used strategically by some of the participants when they were experiencing challenge and by others when they were changing how they made meaning was to pursue their own academic interests. The opportunity to make decisions regarding one's academic pathway through the program was an opportunity that the program provided upon completion of the first semester. Anne's decision to complete a master's thesis seemed to be made so that she could think and be creative as she was when she was

an undergraduate student. Working on her thesis also provided a break from the challenge she experienced to make meaning through self-reflection. Finally, the decision to pursue a master's thesis gave Anne something to show others when people asked her what exactly it was that she studied, from which she took comfort.

David chose to follow his academic interest by obtaining a certificate in organizational change. David was interested in having experiences that provided him with different points of view, and earning his certificate in organizational change did just that. The courses David took to earn his certificate allowed him to obtain a better picture of how universities operate and allocate resources, which in turn allowed him to be more intentional as a professional after graduation.

Ashley took a class that was offered through another department: Administration of Intercollegiate Athletics. Ashley enjoyed the class because she was required to participate in self-reflection through the use of media, which was not a medium used for self-reflection in her student affairs preparation program courses. By this point Ashley had adjusted to self-reflection and found that by taking a class on her own outside of the program she gained confidence in her ability to apply what she was learning.

Seeking external validation. External validation as a source of support for transitioning into a new way of making meaning seemed to be sought out by the participants for two reasons. The first reason was to seek external validation that the way they had been making meaning made sense and the way that they were being asked to make meaning was hard. The participants who sought out this type of

external validation did so when they first experienced challenge to how they were making meaning.

Anne received external validation despite never actually engaging with another person. Anne did not appear to be concerned with the quality of the external validation that she received just that it confirmed her point of view. For example, Anne found support for her belief in large, state schools being the ideal place for student affairs professionals from another peer, who had also attended a large, state school and she “was sure” would agree with her belief. In another example, Anne turned to others she never met to validate her decision not to take another student development theory course. She was confident that those she did not know would agree with her decision because they themselves had not attend a theory-based program, yet were working within the field of student affairs.

Ashley’s validation from others was different than Anne’s in that it actually involved interaction with others. To Ashley, when she began the program it mattered what her peers thought as their thoughts would determine her thoughts. In one of Ashley’s first classes she thought that a professor did not like her, and decided that because the professor did not like her she was receiving a lot of challenge in the classroom. When Ashley received validation from her peers that they also thought the professor did not care for Ashley, it confirmed for her that the problem was the professor’s attitude rather than her own way of making meaning.

Micah’s validation from others was different than Anne or Ashley’s. Micah found himself in a situation where he felt that he was being unfairly blamed for a peer’s arrest. After finding out how some of his peers were being treated, and

through a meeting with a faculty member that only he was invited to, Micah felt validated in his belief that he was being blamed for the arrest of a peer.

The second reason external validation was sought was to support participants who had found a new, more successful way to make meaning. Almost all of the participants indicated that it was meaningful for them to receive such external recognition. For four of the participants, Anne, Ashley, Brandon, and David, the validation came in the form of recognition. Anne experienced validation by receiving a 4.0 each semester after she chose to change her “attitude.” Ashley received validation that she could take theory and put it into practice herself by winning a case study competition. Brandon’s recognition for establishing meaningful relationships and moving away from groupthink came when he won the Outstanding Graduate Student Award at the end of his second year. Finally, David’s external validation was for more of a personal goal that he had set. David wanted to achieve a 4.0 while in graduate school, and although he missed reaching his goal by one class, he was still proud of what he had accomplished.

Seeking others’ help in processing. Several of the participants reached out to others when the way they were making meaning was not allowing them to move forward. Other participants, who transitioned into a new way of making meaning, reached out to others to help them through the transition. In each case those they sought out were more experienced professionals who served as mentors or supervisors, or faculty with which they felt comfortable. Each of the people the participants turned to provided support by making time to help the participants’ process through the challenge they were facing.

Anne turned to a faculty member when she found herself stuck and unable to make sense of her experiences in a different way. Anne decided that her interest in academic experiences made it so that it was not possible for her to engage in a variety of experiences like she was being encouraged to do by the faculty. Anne could not identify any other academic experiences within student affairs beyond her academic advising assistantship, and she was certain that academic experiences were the only experiences in which she would be interested. Anne, wanting to respond to the encouragement of the faculty, sought out a faculty member and explained how she felt. The faculty member affirmed Anne's interest in academic experiences, and helped Anne to see all of the academic possibilities within student affairs. By seeking out assistance, Anne felt supported and was able to have a variety of experiences throughout her time in the preparation program.

Similarly, Kelly also went to a faculty member when she could not figure out why her assistantship experience was not going well. She felt that she was doing the best she could, yet was continuing to disappoint her supervisor. The faculty member Kelly turned to supported Kelly through her frustration by helping her to see the value in setting expectations and then working toward them, which led to a much more amicable relationship between Kelly and her supervisor.

Ashley turned to her supervisor when she was disgruntled with the student affairs preparation program and felt that she also received support. Ashley had two supervisors during her time in the preparation program and was able to articulate a difference in the support she sought and received. Ashley went to her first supervisor for more direction regarding the problems she was experiencing. At the time, the

major problem she was experiencing was disdain for the program because it was not providing her with the answers she needed to successfully handle the problems within her assistantship. The direction her supervisor provided supported Ashley by giving her the structure that she needed in order to begin understanding how the theories she was learning in the classroom applied to her practice. The support Ashley received from her second supervisor was less instructional. Ashley sought support from her second supervisor in the form of advice seeing her second supervisor more as a peer. Ashley's second supervisor responded by providing her with thoughts to consider and allowed Ashley to determine for herself how she would handle her problems.

Similar to Ashley's seeking out the advice of her second supervisor for consideration, David spoke about turning to a mentor when struggling with making choices among all of the opportunities that he was presented within the program. David's challenge in selecting what opportunities to have was due to his interest in experiences that would allow him to grow. Without having an experience David felt he was not able to determine what he would learn from it, and therefore struggled to decide amongst all his options. David appreciated the advice his mentor gave him, often in the form of recommendations, and used it to help narrow his priorities.

Observation. Through observation and listening, participants noted the actions and thoughts of their peers as the participants themselves worked to make meaning, finding comfort observing and listening to what worked and what did not work. Anne noted that it was nice to see people practicing what they had been preaching when a member of the cohort passed away, indicating that she had not necessarily expected that to happen. Brandon noted how helpful observation was

when he was working to figure out a new way to engage in relationships with others, observing that there is no one way for everyone. He identified this realization as paramount to his learning and it allowed him to feel more comfortable being authentic. David and Ashley both commented that it was helpful to watch and listen to others experiences in class, as it allowed them to connect and evaluate their experiences and thoughts to those of others' regardless of their agreement or disagreement with them.

Decision to Select the Preparation Program

Each participant made an intentional decision to go into a student affairs preparation program. The decision-making process for selecting a student affairs preparation program was not the focus of this study, however, what surfaced about how the participants came to select their program is relevant. My decision to include this finding is based on my belief that the information is still transferable to other preparation programs even if it does not connect to one of this study's research questions. It also adds to the rich description of the participants' experiences in the student affairs preparation program.

Personal Interests

For all of the participants, the decision to attend the student affairs preparation program that they did was congruent with the personal interests that they had developed prior to entering the student affairs preparation program. The personal interests of the participants were both practical and aspirational and included: wanting to live near a significant other (Anne and David); not wanting to acquire additional debt (Ashley and Micah); wanting to be within two hours of a large city (Brandon);

wanting to study under someone whose research they had read and pursue academic interests (Kelly and Micah); as well as a desire to attend a program with a cohort model so that connections with others could be more easily established (Micah and Brandon). Regardless of the particular interests, the student affairs preparation program environment connected with the personal interests of the participants in such a way that their interests were fulfilled. Thus, the participants had the opportunity to use their interests in order to help determine which preparation program they would attend.

Building On Experiences

The opportunity to expand upon the skills they had already acquired while working prior to attending the program was also a part of the decision to attend the student affairs preparation program. David wanted to continue building on his past experience working with Greeks, but did not want it to be his primary focus. Kelly wanted to expand the skills she had acquired working as a coordinator in student activities, as well as test her skills in order to determine if they could transfer to a different environment. Micah thought going somewhere new would help him learn new information and have new experiences, both of which he hoped would build on the experiences he had already acquired as a student affairs professional.

Similar to the way in which the participants used their personal interests to help determine which student affairs preparation program to attend, David, Kelly, and Micah, upon realizing that they would be able to build upon their past experiences, used that realization to help determine which preparation program to attend. In addition, David, Kelly, and Micah used past experiences when deciding which

assistantship offer to accept. Each strategically accepted the offer that allowed them to feel the support from what they had learned from the experiences they brought with them, while also being challenged to learn through new experiences.

Appreciation

Similar to the personal interests of the participants and the desire to build on past experiences, the feeling of appreciation was used by the participants to determine which preparation program to select. Anne, Ashley, Brandon, and Micah, all commented that they liked the attention they received during the interview days. Specifically, they spoke about how personally invested the faculty seemed to be not just in them, but also in the program. Anne and Ashley also mentioned a similar connection that they felt to the people at their assistantship site.

Summary

This chapter contained narratives from data collected through three in-depth interviews with six participants who all attended the same student affairs preparation program. The individual stories of each participant are told illustrating each participant's approach to making meaning and how that approach developed as the participant experienced the student affairs preparation program. By sharing the narratives in this manner, the relationship between how the participants' approached making meaning and their experiences within the environment is demonstrated.

The variations among the individual narratives demonstrate the challenges of telling one story of the process of self-authorship for six recent graduates of a student affairs preparation program. The results of this study suggest that the development of how the participants made meaning was influenced by the environmental conditions

of self-reflection, as well as experiencing different perspectives. Finding support also appeared to play a role in how the participants made meaning, as the participants appeared to seek out support that allowed them to maintain how they were making meaning, or support that assisted them as they transitioned in how they made meaning. The ways in which the participants sought support included: pursuing personal academic interests; seeking external validation; seeking others' help in processing; and observation. Finally, included in this chapter are the themes that surfaced from the participants' stories regarding how they chose to attend the preparation program studied. These themes include: personal interests, building on experiences, and appreciation, and are offered with the intent of strengthening the transferability of this study.

Chapter V: Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that how some of the participants made meaning of program experiences developed while in the preparation program. How participants made meaning was influenced by the environmental conditions of self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives. Seeking out and receiving support also appeared to play a role in how the participants made meaning. This chapter will discuss these results in relation to the research questions, as well as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Specifically, the findings were considered in relation to: constructive-developmental theory (self-authorship theory); the environment of reference model; the learning partnerships model; and transition theory. Finally, this chapter includes the implications of the study for future research and current practices, as well as the limitations and strengths of the study.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to conduct a narrative analysis of the process of self-authorship for graduate students within a student affairs preparation program. Specifically, two research questions guided this study: (1) What is the process of self-authorship for graduate students in a student affairs master's program? (2) What are the environmental conditions that promote self-authorship for graduate students in the student affairs master's program? The findings indicate that a relationship exists between the two questions, therefore I will discuss them together. The outcomes of this study also draw attention to the importance of the process students use to make meaning of their graduate school experiences and not to the competency areas that should be taught within a student affairs preparation program.

Whether choosing to go to graduate school directly from undergraduate school or working prior to participating in graduate school, all of the participants felt that they had a new viewpoint from which to conduct their practice upon graduating from the preparation program. For many, this new viewpoint included awareness of one's own perspective as separate from those of others, as well as engaging in intentional self-reflection in order to make meaning and decisions. Each of the participants seemed to experience developing their new perspective in multiple ways as they experienced dissonance created through their preparation program experiences. For some, development of how meaning was made occurred by being asked to participate in self-reflection through coursework or by electing to self-reflect on one's own. For others, how meaning was made developed after experiencing different perspectives both in and outside of the classroom. For all of the participants, support was sought and found in the environment that allowed them to navigate how they made meaning, which seemed to allow opportunity for a few of the participants to experience minimal change in how they made meaning.

For several of the participants, the development of how they made meaning meant moving away from seeking external answers for how they should be and what they should be doing to a place where the participants were beginning determine who they are and who they would be for themselves. These participants often felt frustrated and challenged as they worked to define their interactions with their experiences for themselves. Often they could still see how much easier it would be if they were able to maintain how they had made meaning when they entered the program. At least one of the participants seemed to manage to graduate without

altering how she made meaning. Still, another appeared to enter the program comfortable seeking out new experiences and trying on different perspectives knowing that he would learn more about himself through them.

Connected to the development of how the participants made meaning were two environmental conditions. Both self-reflection and experiencing a different perspective appeared to challenge some of participants to make meaning internally, helping them to separate their own perspective from others around them. Eventually, the process of self-reflection and experiencing a different perspective became a part of how some of the participants made meaning for themselves—no longer serving as just a challenge.

All of the participants sought support for how they were making meaning of their experiences at some point in the program. Some of the participants sought support that allowed them to maintain how they were making meaning, while others found support that assisted them as they developed how they were making meaning. For the most part, the following types of support were found within the structures provided by the student affairs preparation program: pursuing academic interests; seeking external validation; seeking others help in processing, and observation. For example, the structure of the preparation program allowed for the participants to select some courses based on their own interests after the completion of the first semester, which allowed several of the participants to pursue their own academic interests, from which they felt support.

The relationship between how the participants made meaning and the support they received did not go unnoticed by the participants. Often the participants spoke

about how they appreciated being given the opportunity to find support and be supported. For example, the participants who sought out someone else's help in order to process through an experience all spoke about the role that person played when they discussed how they were finally able to make meaning.

In summary, development in how meaning was made did seem to occur for the majority of the participants. Being asked to participate in the process of self-reflection, as well as experiencing different perspectives, tended to influence the development of how the participants made meaning. Support was sought by the participants for how they were making meaning, which included seeking support upon establishing a new way of understanding as well as seeking support to affirm a current way of making meaning. As discussed in the remainder of the chapter, these broad responses to the research questions offer a foundation for understanding the process of self-authorship for graduate students within a student affairs preparation program and the environmental conditions that promote the process.

Theoretical Discussion

Much of the discussion of student affairs preparation programs involves identifying the competency, or knowledge areas, that should be taught (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Ostroth, 1981; Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Saunders & Cooper, 1999; Woodard & Komives, 2003) or the content areas of what was learned (Castellanos et al., 2007; Flowers, 2003; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Herdlein, 2004; Young & Janosik, 2007). Of the research that does explore how those within preparation programs make meaning of their experiences, the student affairs preparation program has been found to be an environment within which movement

toward self-authorship can occur (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Rogers et al., 2004). The results of this study suggest that how graduate students within a preparation program make meaning can develop and that such development is advanced through the environmental conditions of self-reflection and experiencing a different perspective. Support is also sought out as meaning is being made of preparation program experiences through some of the structures composing the preparation program, including those that allow for: pursuing academic interests, seeking external validation, seeking others help in processing, and observation. The relationship between the development of how graduate students make meaning and the environmental conditions that further such development, is discussed next in the next few sections.

Process of Self-Authorship: Returning to Constructive-Developmental Theory

Constructive-developmental theories are grounded in the assumption that the structure individuals use to make meaning is developmental in nature moving from simple to more complex (Boes et al., 2010). Kegan (1982, 1994) defined part of the meaning-making structure as the subject-object balance, and it is consistent with the approach the participants took to making meaning that emerged from the participants' narratives. Subject, according to Kegan, are those things embedded in how individuals make meaning. For example, Kelly seemed to be subject to the way that she approached her assistantship. She could not step outside of the frustrations she was experiencing within her assistantship to look at her situation from a perspective other than her own. Instead, Kelly's advisor had to help her realize she could take the initiative to establish expectations for her position rather than wait for her supervisor

to do so. Another example of what Kegan meant by an experience being subject to an individual occurs within Micah's story. Micah appeared unable to look at his peer's arrest from a perspective that allowed the possibility for Micah to be partially responsible. Instead, Micah's perspective of viewing the incident was subject to how he made sense of the experience—that it was not his fault. Anne looked to be subject to her approach to her coursework. To Anne, the way she had learned to go about her coursework, as an undergraduate student, was subject and it caused her to judge negatively the new way she was being asked to approach her coursework. She could not understand why she was being asked to think about what she was learning in the way that she was. Ashley provides a last example of what Kegan meant by an individual being embedded in how they make meaning. Ashley articulated that at one point she saw her coursework as a reflection of who she was, and at that time Ashley's coursework was subject to her.

Object, within Kegan's (1982, 1994) subject-object balance, are those things that an individual is able reflect on and see from a different perspective when making meaning. For example, by the time Anne completed the student affairs preparation program, she was able to understand why she might be interpreted as firm from the perspective of her peers, and she could speculate how she might be perceived if she were to work within different environments. Any firmness in Anne's personality had become object to her, as she was able to see it from others' viewpoints. Brandon was able to make his passion for student affairs object and separate his own interest in the profession from those of his "star student" RA, who was not interested in going into the profession of student affairs. Micah was able to see the change in leadership

within his assistantship office as object. He could reflect on and view the situation from different perspectives, those of his incoming co-workers for example, as well as contemplate his own thoughts about the situation. The design of the courses within the preparation program was object to Kelly. She could see that the courses she was taking were designed intentionally to develop her and her peers, and wondered if other graduate courses outside the preparation program were designed similarly.

As the subject-object balance used to make meaning evolves toward complexity within constructive-developmental theory, individuals move what was subject within the balance to object (Kegan, 1994). This process of evolution emerged is demonstrated in Ashley's story. At the beginning of her time in the program Ashley could not see what she brought in terms of undergraduate experiences to the profession of student affairs. At the time, Ashley kept noticing and comparing her experiences to the undergraduate experiences her peers had prior to attending the student affairs preparation program, (e.g., fraternity/sorority president). For Ashley, the undergraduate experiences she had participated in were subject to her, and because they were not similar to those of her peers, she felt inadequate and unprepared. By the time that Ashley had graduated from the student affairs preparation program she was able to see how her previous experiences informed her as a student affairs professional and no longer felt deficient as a professional when comparing herself to her peers. Thus, Ashley's undergraduate experiences had become object to her, allowing her to reflect upon them, enabling her to determine their value.

Within constructive-developmental theory, the integration of the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive dimensions are also understood to be a part of the meaning making structure (Boes, et al., 2010). The integration of the dimensions is consistent with the narratives the participants shared. An example of the interpersonal dimension surfaced from Micah's story. The interpersonal dimension helped Micah to see that he held different thoughts than those of his co-worker peers. Micah viewed himself as more professional. Micah believed that his peers should have told the interim director how they felt about the interim director's working style before going above the interim director's head and sharing their thoughts. An example of the intrapersonal dimension emerged from Brandon's articulation that he was not okay with his peer and co-worker's relationship with an undergraduate student. Brandon's internal thoughts told him that the situation was not okay, and while disappointed that others saw the relationship differently, he maintained his beliefs about the relationship. Finally, the cognitive dimension appeared within Ashley's story through her desire to want the environment to provide her with the external formulas she needed to follow in order to be successful. Ashley was unable to understand that she needed to work to take the information she was learning and make sense of it herself before she could put it into practice. Her inability to see her role and responsibility in the learning process led her to frustration.

Self-authorship theory. The development of how meaning is made within the constructive-developmental theories of self-authorship provides one explanation for understanding how the participants made meaning during their time in the

preparation program, and the results of this study resonate with these theories. The narratives in the study demonstrate that participants' meaning making structures became more complex, however, none achieved self-authorship during their time in the program. Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of self-authorship, which uses the subject-object balance to make meaning as individuals move through the five orders of consciousness composing his self-authorship theory, served as the foundation for Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory, which is composed of phases. Several of the participants in this study seemed to transition from one order of consciousness or phase to the next as described in the narratives.

First order. Kegan's first order is distinguished by perceptions and impulses' being subject to the individual's meaning making structure and movements and sensations being object. No evidence surfaced of Kegan's first order of consciousness amongst the participants' stories, which is not surprising as first order is the order most children use to make meaning (Berger, Hasegawa, Hammerman, & Kegan, 2007). There is no equivalent phase within Baxter Magolda's theory to Kegan's first order of consciousness.

Second order or external formulas. The second order of consciousness in Kegan's theory appears at the foundation of how one of the participants, Anne, made sense of her experiences when she began the student affairs preparation program. Kegan's second order of consciousness is connected to the external formulas phase in Baxter Magolda's theory (Walczak, 2008). Anne came to the preparation program directly from her undergraduate institution, where she was a traditional-aged college student. Love and Guthrie (2005) found that individual's transition from second to

third order often occurs between the ages of 12-20. Anne, a traditional-age college student, was not much older. Although there is no exact age connected to individuals' transitioning through Kegan's orders, other research has found that approximately one-eighth to one-third of adults operate in part or whole from the second order of consciousness (Berger et al., 2007).

Baxter Magolda (2001) called the second order of consciousness the external formulas phase (Walczak, 2008). This occurs when an individual internalizes, "external 'shoulds' to answer the 'who am I' question; defining their internal sense of self through what they perceived that others thought was appropriate" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 72). As a result, others' voices eclipse those of the individual, however the individual is so focused on being independent that he or she presents his or her own voice as though it is internal (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Individuals use the subject object balance in this phase, or order, in such a way that their own needs and preferences are subject, while their perceptions and impulses are object (Kegan, 1994).

Congruent with the second order of consciousness and the external formulas phase, several times Anne appeared to struggle with her own preferences, but seemed to do so in a way that allowed her own disposition and preferences to endure. For example, Anne could not understand why her peers saw her as firm, why they did not want to work at large, well-known, state institutions, and she struggled connecting to students who did not attend school out-of-state. All of these actions demonstrate how Anne seemed to be seeking out formulas (e.g., be seen as sensitive, complete a master's thesis) external to her and following them as though they were her own

internal beliefs, which is consistent with Baxter Magolda's (2001) external formula's phase. Anne's external script was characterized by her choosing to go to an out-of-state, large, well-known state institution, where her role was as the more caring person amongst her peers, and she was able to participate in learning for the sake of learning. By following this script Anne felt she was independent and it led her to success as an undergraduate. Thus, Anne was frustrated to find out that her peers, and the students she worked with were not following that same script, that they had different perspectives, and she judged them negatively for that. In each of these experiences Anne's preferences were subject to her. It seemed that Anne cared about others' opinions being different than her own because those different opinions might affect how others perceived her, which could have consequences for her. Eventually Anne seemed to arrive at a place where she realized the external formula she was following was no longer working for her, which helped her gain perspective on her preferences.

Other participants also appeared to have been following external formulas prior to attending the student affairs preparation program. For example, Brandon shared that when he was an undergraduate student he used groupthink, joined clubs and organizations for his resume, and would dress a certain way to fit in with others. Brandon thought that this is what he needed to do in order to get into a student affairs preparation program and to be successful in college. David, as an undergraduate student, did not participate much in applying to or succeeding in college, and instead followed the path that his coach, fraternity, and parents created for him, allowing him to be successful as a first-generation college student. Yet, for both Brandon and

David the motivation for following external scripts appeared to be grounded in their ideals and values (Brandon's ideal of being the "star student", David's value of higher education), which is more congruent with following an external script from the third order of consciousness.

Third order and external formulas. In Kegan's (1981, 1994) third order of consciousness, what was subject in second order (needs and preferences) is now object, and what is now subject are the individual's values and ideals. Individuals operating from the third order can see another's perspective, but do not understand how other's opinions influence them; thus, they are often subject to their relationships putting others' interests ahead of their own (Ignelzi, 2005; Kegan, 2005). The external formulas phase of Baxter Magolda's theory is also present during the third order of consciousness, however this time the formulas have been internalized, so individuals care about others' opinions of them because those opinions define them.

The way in which Anne made meaning seemed to be congruent with Kegan's third order of consciousness by the time she completed the student affairs preparation program. Anne spoke about several successful interactions she had helping the students with whom she worked despite thinking it was more ideal to work with less vocation-oriented students. Anne's supervisor agreed with her that she would probably enjoy working at a more well-known, state institution, yet rather than feeling supported, Anne felt concern for what her supervisor's opinion might mean about her as a person. Anne was also able to see why others might view her as firm depending on the environment. Thus, intrapersonally, Anne's view of herself seemed

to become what she heard others say when describing her, which was helping her to begin questioning the beliefs that she had brought with her to the program.

Although the way Anne made meaning appeared to evolve toward the third order of consciousness while she was in the student affairs preparation program, there were some participants who appeared to start the program making meaning from Kegan's third order of consciousness and Baxter Magolda's external formulas phase. According to Ignelzi (2005), most traditional-aged college students are in the third order of consciousness, making it not surprising that those not too far out from college were still making meaning from the third order. Kegan (2002) also discovered that the majority of people operate from the third order of consciousness throughout their adulthood, while Baxter Magolda (2001) found that 50% of her participants demonstrated the external formula phase or third order of consciousness during the first year after graduation.

Ashley appeared to be in the third order of consciousness and external formulas phase when she started the preparation program and because of that she believed the program should teach her what she needed to know in order to do her job. Cognitively, Ashley wanted the environment to provide her with the external formula she needed to follow in order to be successful, and seem to understand that she needed to make meaning of what she was learning herself before she could put it into practice. Her inability to see her role and responsibility in the learning process frustrated her. In fact, Ashley was so frustrated that she considered leaving the program in search of an environment that would tell her what she needed to know. Congruent with operating from the third order and defining oneself through external

formulas, Ashley also held back from sharing some of her thoughts in class for fear that her peers, in particular her co-workers, would not think well of her. Ashley was allowing her co-workers' thoughts to supersede her own in the classroom, and considered switching classes so that she would not have to deal with that dynamic.

Brandon's groupthink way of thinking is also an example of what appears to be operation from the third order of consciousness. Intrapersonally, Brandon allowed his interests to become those of his peers, so much so that Brandon struggled as he learned to discover his own interests and thoughts when he was required to participate in self-reflection. Up until then, however, Brandon seemed to be following a mental script developed through his interpersonal dimension that was composed of his friends' and family members' thoughts. The script had become for Brandon his intrapersonal dimension in that it was what he used to make meaning of who he was and the experiences that he had.

Micah also appeared to be at the third order of consciousness when he entered the preparation program. Micah struggled to see that the relationships he was in with his peers were reciprocal and that he had some responsibility in one of his peer's arrest. Micah inferred through his cognitive and interpersonal dimensions that by being asked to meet with a faculty member, as well as sit through a lecture in a group class about alcohol, he was being accused of causing his peer to get arrested. Connecting data through inferences, as well as developing hypotheses, is an ability that those in the third order of consciousness can do (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Intrapersonally, Micah did not like that he was being accused for his peer's arrest, and responded by choosing to not socialize with some of his peers.

Just like Ashley, Brandon, and Micah, Kelly seemed to be making meaning from the third order of consciousness or external formulas phase when she entered the preparation program, which can be seen through her assistantship experiences. Kelly began her relationship with her supervisor, wanting her supervisor to think well of her, and waiting for her supervisor to tell her what she should be doing. She was unable to see that she could take the initiative and establish goals and expectations. When her supervisor evaluated her poorly for the work that she was doing she felt terrible, like she was a failure. It was not until her advisor helped Kelly and her supervisor establish expectations that Kelly understood what she needed to do in her assistantship.

Kelly appeared to continue to make meaning out of the third order throughout her time in the program. Kelly, using her interpersonal dimension, seemed to wait for others to express their thoughts before determining her own, thereby allowing herself to intrapersonally define who she was through the eyes of others. Kelly also continued her third order way of thinking as a new professional, which is seen in her inability to determine if she should attend a conference. Kelly asked friends if they thought she should attend the conference, and was concerned about offending others by going even though she had received an invitation. Such concern for what others thought of her caused, and continues to cause, Kelly to set aside her interests and thoughts while waiting to understand those of others.

The crossroads. Baxter Magolda (2001) labeled the transition from third to fourth order of consciousness the crossroads. The crossroads occurs when an individual becomes dissatisfied with using external formulas to make meaning and

begins to seek out ways to make meaning inwardly. This phase, according to Baxter Magolda, can be marked by a period of frustration, unfulfillment, or crisis, which several of the participants demonstrated.

For example, Ashley had a build up of stressors from work and the classroom that caused her to become so frustrated that she considered leaving the student affairs preparation program all together. Ashley was being pushed along the cognitive dimension to determine for herself how she should respond to the situations in her assistantship, while at the same time being asked to make sense of, reflect on, and apply for herself the information she was learning in her classes. She did not feel secure in her ability to come up with her own thoughts and determine what she should do on her own. Even outside of the classroom, Ashley wanted there to be a rule for how she and her peers should behave when using alcohol. Interpersonally, Ashley compared herself to her peers and did not feel she measured up. She believed her peers had better experiences from their undergraduate institutions to pull from than she did, and that by not having such experiences she was not as qualified. Intrapersonally, Ashley's internal voice questioned if she was even in the right program. The level of frustration and way in which Ashley's dimensions were being challenged appears to have brought her to what Baxter Magolda identifies as the snapping point. The snapping point is a place within the crossroads phase where an individual begins to make meaning from a more internalized manner (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As Ashley seemed to be reaching the snapping point she sought support from her supervisor and through her assistantship, which appeared to provide

her the structure she needed to develop how she was approaching her preparation program experiences.

Brandon seemed to enter the crossroads and reach a snapping point at the end of his first year. Movement into the crossroads for Brandon seemed to primarily involve his relationships with others, which Baxter Magolda (2001) found to be one of the stimuli for reaching the snapping point. Brandon had not been able to establish real, meaningful relationships with his peers, yet he desired them and it was this desire that appeared to motivate Brandon to develop how he approached and made meaning of his interactions with others and his experiences.

Micah's experience with his peer's arrest, as well as with his co-workers appeared to be consistent with the crossroads. Micah was frustrated by what he felt was his being accused of causing his peer's arrest, and responded by avoiding situations with which he disagreed. It was in his assistantship where Micah began to understand that avoiding disagreement with others around him was not practical, and he began testing out what it might be like for him to share his thoughts in order to help others knowing that they might not accept them.

Fourth order. According to Kegan (1994), 59% of adults in a composite sample did not reach fourth order. Ignelzi (2005) found that only one-third to one-half of adults fully reaches fourth order. The fourth order of consciousness in Kegan's theory is where self-authorship exists. David seemed to be at the fourth order when he entered the program by bringing with him the beginnings of his own framework that he used to make sense of his experiences. For example, David valued his relationship with his partner and was willing to act upon that value when choosing

a program to attend. He identified that his partner was a significant support for him while he was in the program, and while he considered this relationship in the choices he made, he did not allow the relationship to define him. This way of functioning is characteristic of the fourth order of consciousness, where individuals are able to view the world from other perspectives, but are not consumed by the others' perspectives. Instead, individuals interact with the world using their own internal value and belief system allowing them to create the interactions they have with the world.

How Ashley and Brandon were making meaning in their second year of the preparation program is also consistent with the fourth order of consciousness. For example, Ashley no longer desired having the same undergraduate experiences as her peers. Instead, she was valuing the experiences she had as a transfer athlete while she was an undergraduate student and determining for herself the worth of these experiences to her as a student affairs professional. As for Brandon, he was no longer using groupthink to determine his interactions with others, but was instead enjoying learning about others' perspectives and comparing them to his own.

Authoring one's life. In Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory, Kegan's fourth order of consciousness is composed of two phases that together are labeled achieving self-authorship. The first is becoming the author of one's own life, which includes doing intense self-reflection. Participating in intense self-reflection within this phase is not referring to participating in self-reflection through required coursework. Rather, the participants spoke about choosing for themselves to participate in self-reflection, and it is that activity of self-reflection that resonates with this phase of Baxter Magolda's theory.

Ashley, for example, spoke about how she began to self-reflect on her own during her second year in the program, and continues to find herself reflecting all of the time as a new professional. Such reflection allowed, and allows, her to determine for herself how she approaches and makes meaning of her experiences within student affairs. Brandon also mentioned participating in self-reflection during his time in the program, noting that it helped him grow and had become a part of how he thought as a new professional. David seemed to enter the program already engaging in reflection, which was seen, for example, in how he spoke about the professional experience he had acquired prior to attending the program. David mentioned how working as a professional prior to attending the preparation program allowed him to take what he was learning in the class and reflect on it through his experiences thereby enabling him to make meaning of it. David, like Ashley and Brandon, mentioned that he continues to self-reflect, which allows him to be more intentional in his practice. Micah also began to participate in self-reflection on his own while in the preparation program as was demonstrated in the reflections he shared about the changes that occurred within his assistantship office. For Micah, his reflections led him to determine that he had a responsibility to confront his peers about the course of action they were taking. Micah has continued, as a new professional, to participate in the process of self-reflection, as demonstrated in what he shared concerning the challenges he feels confronting his peers.

Internal foundation. The second part of the self-authorship phase of Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory is moving toward internalization, which did not occur for Baxter Magolda's participants until after age 30. During this part of the self-

authorship process, the individual creates an internal foundation based on the intense self-reflection experienced in the authoring one's life phase, and the internal foundation serves as a framework for answering the question of what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others (Baxter Magolda, 2001). At this phase, individuals appear at peace with the experiences they have, often selecting to have experiences that allow them to live in congruence with their beliefs and values. None of the narratives appeared to illustrate the internal foundations phase.

Fifth order. The fifth order of consciousness in Kegan's theory was also not demonstrated in any of the stories, nor is there an equivalent phase in Baxter Magolda's theory. The fifth order of consciousness is when individuals become comfortable with paradox by seeing how their own internal belief system is limited by historical, cultural, personal, and other forces. The fifth order of consciousness is rarely achieved.

Environmental Conditions Promoting the Process of Self-Authorship

Rogers et al. (2004) found that student affairs preparation programs, including the core values of the program, pedagogy, and curriculum design can be intentionally structured to promote the process of self-authorship. The environmental conditions that appeared to promote development of the participants' made meaning making structures are consistent with Rogers et al.'s findings. Specifically, the environmental conditions that emerged in this study are: self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives. Also emerging from the stories are ways in which the participants sought out and received support for how they were making meaning of their

preparation program experiences including: pursuing personal academic interests, seeking external validation, seeking others' help in processing, and observation.

Environment of reference. The environment of reference model offers a structural explanation of where in the preparation program the two environmental conditions, self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives, could be found. The process of self-reflection seemed to be a guiding philosophy of the preparation program making it an institutional component of the environment. Participants spoke about being asked to reflect in their coursework (Anne, Kelly, Brandon, Ashley, and David), in their interactions with faculty (Anne, Kelly, Micah, and Ashley), and even when applying to the program (David).

Self-reflection was also an activity that the participants brought to the preparation program making it a social component of the environment. For example, Anne and Micah, while not identifying self-reflection outright, participated in the process when making meaning. Anne reflected on her peers' perception of her as firm and not holding the same beliefs about large, well-known state institutions, while Micah, reflected, and continues to reflect, on the responsibility he felt, as well as the approach he would and did take, to confronting his co-workers about the decisions they were making in his assistantship. Brandon, Ashley, and David all spoke about how they used self-reflection, specifically identifying it when sharing their stories, to help them make meaning of their experiences within the preparation program and are continuing to do so as new professionals. Thus, the two ways that self-reflection was present in the environment made it a social-institutional effect in the environment of reference model.

Experiencing different perspectives was the second environmental condition that surfaced from the participants' stories that seemed to promote the development of how the participants made meaning. It appeared to emerge from the environment in two ways both of which connected it to being an institutional component of the environment of reference. First, experiencing different perspectives, like the environmental condition of self-reflection, appeared to be a condition found within the classroom environment of the preparation program. Both Anne and Ashley spoke about the challenges they felt being asked to consider various theoretical perspectives in their classes. Ashley also shared that she felt challenged through a specific assignment in which she was asked to try on a different identity as she reflected on her experiences. Ashley, Brandon, and Micah all spoke about how they were surprised and frustrated by different perspectives faculty members shared in the classroom, indicating that they felt it meant that they were not liked, were being targeted, or that there was something wrong with them. Several of the participants, including Anne, Ashley, and David mentioned the discussion-based format of the classroom, which challenged them as they were asked to consider their peers' perspectives.

The second way that all of the participants seemed to experience different perspectives was through interactions with others in their assistantships. Having an assistantship was a required part of the student affairs preparation program. Anne was challenged by the students with which she interacted who focused on different goals than she did when she was an undergraduate student. Kelly experienced uneasiness with her supervisor's "crapshoot" philosophy to programming. The

inconsistency in the director vacancy in Micah's office and his co-workers' view of the interim director challenged Micah as he worked to navigate his practice in an environment that he felt was lacking direction. Brandon experienced different perspectives from a "star student" RA who did not choose to go into student affairs, as well as from a co-worker's relationship with a RA and his co-workers' views of it. Ashley's experience with different perspectives involved strict policies around alcohol at her assistantship site, which only illuminated, in her mind, the lack of such policies in the preparation program. Finally, David experienced different perspectives in his assistantship through aspects of his identity. David was one of only a few men working in his office, and was required to teach a class through his assistantship in which he found himself being the only male and White person in the room.

There were also avenues that emerged in the environment through which the participants sought support, and the environment of reference model also helps give structure to where they were found in the environment. Specifically, the participants sought support by: pursuing personal academic interests, seeking external validation, seeking others help in processing, and observation. Each way of finding support is supported through the policies and philosophies that seemed to be present in the preparation program environment making them a part of the institutional component of the environment of reference model. For example, the preparation program allowed those within it to determine some of their own courses after the first semester, thereby creating the opportunity for the participants to pursue their own academic interests. External validation was provided in the form of grades; Ashley's

assistantship site encouraged participation in case study competitions, and the institution that hosted the preparation program distributed annual awards to graduate students. As a part of the program, the participants were required to obtain an assistantship, as well as complete several internships, and have one-on-one meetings with their supervisors at least every other week. Such requirements introduce students to a variety of student affairs professionals, who, in addition to the faculty within the program were available to the participants to help them process their experiences. Such requirements also provide a variety of opportunities through which students could observe student affairs professionals, as well as their peers, practice. Table 2 provides a chart of the structure the environment of reference model provides to the environmental conditions and areas of support for the participants illustrating where they found support in the preparation program environment.

Table 2

Environment of Reference Model

Component/Effect	Environmental Condition
Institutional Component	Experiencing Different Perspectives Pursuing Personal Academic Interests Seeking External Validation Seeking Others Help In Processing Observation
Social-Institutional Effect	Self-Reflection

Learning partnerships. At the same time that the environment of reference offers structure to the environmental conditions and ways of finding support that surfaced within the findings of this study, so too does the learning partnerships model. The learning partnerships model is intended to promote the process of self-authorship through the establishment of partnerships between the environment and

the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. Given its purpose and structure, the learning partnerships model provides one possible explanation for how the environmental conditions led to the development of how meaning was made by the participants, as well as how support was obtained by the participants.

The preparation programs continual use of self-reflection (e.g., coursework, faculty interactions, application, etc.) created experiences for the participants within which they were asked to make meaning themselves. The process of self-reflection required participants to place their self at the center of the knowledge creation process, which is an assumption of the learning partnerships model, as well as situate the learning in their own experiences, a principle of the learning partnerships model. Both the assumption and the principle that the process of self-reflection upholds are connected to the intrapersonal dimension within the learning partnerships model. Thus, the participants, through self-reflection, were being asked to use their own internal belief system to construct meaning. When the participants had not yet established their own internal belief system, being asked to engage in self-reflection seemed to promote their advancing how they were making meaning so that those participants could begin to do so. For example, when Anne was asked to participate in self-reflection through her coursework she was frustrated. She did not understand the point of sharing her own thoughts, and by being asked to share them she was challenged to determine how she had constructed them. For Anne, this seemed to begin her consideration of others' perspectives and what they meant for her. Ashley and Brandon also found the process of self-reflection to be challenging. For them, however, the challenge was not in the consideration of others' perspectives, but in the

process of establishing their own perspective as separate from those of others. David appeared the most comfortable out of all the participants with self-reflection, seeming to understand upon entering the program that his perspective might not be the same as others around him. He used self-reflection to help establish further his perspective.

The condition of experiencing different perspectives that also surfaced from the findings is consistent with another assumption and principle of the learning partnerships model. Experiencing different perspectives is consistent with the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, and the principle of validating the participants' ability to know. Both of these are connected to the cognitive dimension in the learning partnerships model. In this way, the participants were being asked to recognize that they could make meaning for themselves based on the experiences, beliefs, and values that composed their intrapersonal dimension. For many of the participants, this recognition seemed to be a challenge for how they were making meaning, prompting them to develop their approach. For example, Anne experienced working with undergraduate students who took a more vocational approach to their college experience helping her to see how her own experience shaped her thoughts about the purpose of higher education and the privileges she experienced as an undergraduate student. Micah experienced co-workers who held different beliefs about the process that were used to address issues within his assistantship. This experience began helping Micah see that he could determine his own approach based on his past experiences as well as his belief that he had a responsibility to try to reach out to his co-workers to discuss their difference of opinion. Brandon's experience with different perspectives seemed, at first, to astound Brandon. For example,

Brandon questioned if he was not defining his Black identity correctly through challenging interactions with an African-American faculty member. Also, he could not understand why a “star student” RA would not want to go into student affairs. Eventually, Brandon began to realize that he could use his own experiences to determine his own understanding, which might be different than others around him. Ashley, like Brandon, came to realize that she could use her own experiences to reach her own understandings through her experience with different perspectives provided through her assistantship and in the classroom.

The learning partnerships model also provides a structure for understanding how the support sought out by the participants connected to the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. The principles of the learning partnerships model are intended to provide support to the challenges offered through the assumptions composing the learning partnerships model. The four ways for finding support emerging from the participants’ narratives seem to be consistent with the principles within the learning partnerships model. The first way participants sought out support was by pursuing their personal academic interests. Pursuing personal academic interests seemed to be a way to situate their learning in their own experiences, a principle connected to the intrapersonal dimension in the learning partnerships model. Specifically, the experiences the participants seemed to be situating their learning in were those that supported how they were making meaning. For example, Anne, Kelly, and Ashley all seemed to speak to experiences they had taking courses that allowed them to make meaning in their own way, rather than the

more reflective way they were being asked to think in their preparation program classes.

The next two ways that the participants found support were to seek external validation and through observation. Both of these avenues of support appeared to be connected to the cognitive dimension through the principle of validating the participants' capacity to know. By receiving external validation through such structures as grades and awards, participants indicated that they felt affirmed in how they were making meaning of what they were learning. Observation also appeared to support how several of the participants were making meaning. Through observation, participants were able to consider how others approached, understood, and implemented what they were learning thereby helping the participants to see that they could determine for themselves how they would approach and make meaning of their experiences.

The final way that participants found support was to seek out others for their help in processing when the participants were struggling to make meaning of their experiences on their own. This behavior of the participants speaks to the mutually constructing meaning principle within the learning partnerships model that is connected to the interpersonal dimension. For example, Anne approached a faculty member who helped her understand how she could get a variety of "academic" student affairs experiences; Ashley turned to her supervisor to discuss her frustrations with what she was learning in the classroom; and, David sought out his mentor to help him determine which experiences he should select within the preparation program. All four of the ways in which the participants found support for how they

were making meaning while in the preparation program, as well as the two environmental conditions that seemed to help some participants develop how they made meaning are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3
Learning Partnerships Model

Developmental Dimension	Principle	Support	Assumption	Environmental Condition
Intrapersonal	Situating learning in the learners' experience	Pursuing personal academic interests	Self at the center of knowledge creation	Self-reflection
Cognitive	Validating the learner's capacity to know	Seeking external validation	Knowledge is socially constructed	Experiencing different perspectives
Interpersonal	Mutually constructing meaning	Observation Seeking others help in processing	Authority and expertise are shared in the construction of knowledge	

Transition theory. The environment of reference model helped provide information regarding where in the preparation program environment the environmental conditions and support were found. The learning partnerships model offered one explanation as to how the environmental conditions and support were connected to the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. Transition theory offers another explanation of the interaction between the participants and the environment.

Within Schlossberg et al. (1995) theory of transition individuals determine when they are experiencing transition, as well as factors within the environment that help them cope with the transition. Several of the participants spoke to acquiring a

new way of thinking from their experiences within the preparation program thereby identifying that they experienced transition. For example, David referenced having obtained a, “new worldview”; Kelly mentioned she was now able to apply research to her practice; Micah spoke about learning that his own perspective was not providing him with the “full picture”; and Ashley mentioned arriving at a place at the end of the program where she had become a critical thinker who would be a continual learner.

Schlossberg et al.’s theory also identified four dimensions within which individuals can navigate when coping with transitions: situation (e.g., timing, previous experience, concurrent stress), self (e.g., personal characteristics, psychological resources), support (e.g., types, amount), and strategies (e.g., categories, coping modes). The environmental conditions that emerged in this study as well as the ways in which the participants sought support, appear to be connected to three of the four categories of Schlossberg et al.’s (1995) coping offers.

The two environmental conditions that surfaced from the findings (self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives) are a part of Schlossberg et al.’s self category for coping. Self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives for some of the participants had become a personal characteristic. These participants used self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives as processes to make meaning of the transitions they were experiencing thereby providing themselves with support during the transitions. For example, David spoke to this when he shared that self-reflection helped him to “glean” meaning from his experiences, and Anne spoke about it by sharing that self-reflection helped her to hear others’ perspectives.

Three of the ways participants pursued support were seeking external validation, seeking others' help in processing, and observation. All three of these can be understood as part of the support category of factors that Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified. In seeking external validation, others' help in processing, and through observation, the participants went to other individuals and structures within the environment for support. In contrast, when pursuing personal academic interests, the participants appeared to be making choices that would allow them to determine their path as they experienced transition, making it a part of the strategy category. Neither the environmental conditions, nor the ways the participants sought support appeared to be a part of the situation category of Schlossberg et al.'s theory. Table 4 illustrates both the environmental conditions and approaches to receiving support.

Table 4

Environmental Conditions and Transition Factors

Factor	Condition
Support	Seeking external validation Seeking others help in processing Observation
Self	Self-reflection Experiencing different perspectives
Strategies	Pursuing personal academic interests
Situation	None present

Implications for Practice

Many implications for the practice of student affairs professionals, including faculty, arose from the results of this study. The first is that the participants appeared to still be moving toward self-authorship by the time they had completed the student affairs preparation program. Still, how they made meaning had evolved while in the preparation program. This supports Renn and Jessup-Anger's (2008) finding that

new professionals are still moving toward self-authorship. The implications of this finding are significant in many ways. The demands student affairs professionals often face, new or experienced, are fourth order or self-authored demands. Revisiting one of the demands presented in Chapter Two, an increasingly diverse student population, demonstrates the need for fourth order ways of making meaning. Working to meet the needs and advocate for diverse students requires student affairs professionals to make responsible and ethical decisions and understand a diversity of perspectives. These are all abilities one acquires through self-authorship. Yet, the findings in this study indicate that many entering professionals are just beginning to move out of the third and into the fourth order of consciousness. Not being able to make meaning in a manner that successfully allows an individual to meet his or her job responsibilities can lead to potential frustration for the individual, as well as other negative consequences, such as poor evaluations or separation from the job.

Although the participants did not fully reach self-authorship, they did move that way and several indicated that they were seeking environments as new professionals where they would be able to continue developing in that direction. For faculty members of preparation programs, this finding is a reminder of the importance of helping graduate students understand the job search process, thereby enabling graduates to find environments that support their continued development. For supervisors of new professionals, this finding highlights the importance of intentionally creating an environment that allows recent graduates to continue to develop toward self-authorship. The results of this study would indicate that to do so would mean to ensure that self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives, the

two environmental conditions that appeared to promote the development of how the participants made meaning in this study, are a part of their new professional environment.

Both self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives are transferable to the student affairs practitioner environment, as well as to other student affairs preparation program environments. For example, self-reflection emerged from the participants' stories as an activity that helped their meaning making structure evolve. Evaluating preparation program courses and environments for reflective opportunities throughout the program, including coursework, classroom structure, the program application, and faculty-student appointments is something preparation program faculty should consider.

Deliberately involving self-reflection in the practitioner environment is also possible. Self-reflection could be incorporated through formalized processes such as weekly reports or as an element in one-on-one meetings. Self-reflection can also be integrated into more informal processes such as asking questions in casual conversations or encouraging personal journaling. The key would be for supervisors to not just simply ask for reports about what is going on, but to dig deeper and challenge new professionals to reflect on the meaning they are making of their experiences.

The other environmental conditions that arose from the participants' stories that helped advance how some of the participants made meaning was experiencing different perspectives. It, like self-reflection, is transferable to both the preparation program and practitioner environment. Faculty within preparation programs can

provide opportunities for graduate students within their programs to experience different perspectives through the classroom structure (dialogue-centered), coursework (assignments designed intentionally to help students make meaning from another perspective), course content (providing multiple perspectives within the same content area), and program requirements such as assistantships, internships, and practicum experiences. Practitioners can assist new professionals in experiencing different perspectives through dialogue-centered office meetings, supporting the reading of a variety of literature related to the content area within which the new professional works, and supporting professional development through which new professionals would learn information and interact with other professionals working within the same content area.

Seeking support appeared to be an important part of the meaning-making process for all of the participants. The ways that the participants found support within the student affairs preparation program environment is transferable to both the preparation program and practitioner environment. Being given the opportunity to pursue personal academic interests within the experience they were having, whether it be classes or internships, allowed the participants to be strategic in how they approached the challenges they were experiencing. Providing the flexibility for students to make academic-related choices as they transition through their preparation program experiences is an opportunity that faculty could provide in their programs' structure. Offering opportunities for those who just recently graduated to pursue their academic interests are feasible too, although may vary in degree depending on the position and opportunities available. For example, new professionals might be given

the opportunity to determine their choice of committee appointments, student organization advising options, particular work goals upon which to focus, and professional development opportunities.

Participants also received support through external validation. External validation in the form of letter grades is automatically a part of the preparation program environment, however, external validation can be incorporated into the preparation program environment in other ways too. Graduate student awards, promotion of case study competitions, and establishing goals with advisors are all structures that can be brought into preparation programs through which graduate students can obtain external validation. Several structures often exist within the practitioner environment through which new professionals can obtain external validation. Annual evaluations and campus-wide awards are examples of such structures. Additional ways that external validation can be provided in the environment are division-wide newsletters that spotlight the exceptional work a new professional, and the encouragement of case study competitions for new professionals through the funding of professional development opportunities that host them.

Seeking others' help in processing an experience that challenged how the participants were making meaning was another way they found support. This finding is easily transferable to other preparation programs. Intentionally structuring preparation program environments so that students have exposure both to faculty and a variety of student affairs professionals increases the opportunities available to students to turn to another for help in processing an experience. Requiring one-on-one meetings between graduate students and their assistantship/internship/practicum

supervisor, as well as requiring monthly advisor meetings, also increases the opportunities for students to seek out others' help in processing an experience. Within the practitioner environment, one-on-one meetings are also opportunities that can be provided to aid new professionals in processing experiences. Participation in division or institution-wide committees, as well as service and professional development opportunities, can also expose new professionals to a variety of faculty and staff at the institution to whom they can turn to process an experience.

Finally, observation was another way of seeking support that emerged from the participants' stories. Providing opportunities for observation can be provided through the preparation program environment by designing site-visit coursework, or requiring assistantships, internships, or practicum experiences that involve students' acquiring practical experience in student affairs. One opportunity new professionals are automatically exposed to is that of observing the office within which they work. Additional opportunities for observation can be provided to new professionals by encouraging them to volunteer to help with campus events and providing opportunities to serve on campus-wide committees.

Implications for Research

The findings of this study bring attention to several areas needing further research. First, continued study of the process of self-authorship for the participants within this study can be conducted. Continued study of the participants has potential to reveal additional insight into the ways the participants seek support in their environment. It appeared from the narratives that support for how the participants were making meaning was sought out in two ways: allowing the participants to

continue how they were making meaning or to help the participants as they developed their approach to making meaning. Continued study of the participants also has promise to reveal the process of self-authorship within the student affairs work environment and any environmental conditions within the practitioner environment that promote of the process of self-authorship. Understanding the process of self-authorship in the preparation program environment, as well as environmental conditions that promote it, can potentially provide insight into how the environment can be structured to promote the development of self-authorship.

Second, the environmental conditions seemed to connect to the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. It is worthwhile to conduct further research into what exactly the connection is between the dimensions and the environmental conditions. Such research can provide greater insight into how environmental conditions can be structured to promote self-authorship.

Another area of future research that could be explored based on the findings of this study is Baxter Magolda's external formulas phase. Baxter Magolda (2001) has connected this phase to Kegan's (1982, 1994) third order of consciousness, however Anne's story demonstrated that that she was using external formula from a self-interested position when Anne began the program, placing Anne at second order. Perhaps there are additional phases occurring within the third order in addition to the external formulas phase, similar to the phases Baxter Magolda identified (authoring one's life and internal foundation) to be occurring within the fourth order. Identification of any additional phases within the third order would add to what is known about the development of self-authorship.

Research can also be conducted regarding the role that dissonance plays in developing toward self-authorship, as well as into various types of dissonance. It appeared in this study that when the participants were developing how they made meaning, it was due to the activity of self-reflection or experience of different perspectives that created dissonance in such a way that development occurred. Although not all of the participants seemed to develop how they made meaning of their preparation program experiences, they did all experience dissonance indicating that not all experiences with dissonance lead to development.

A fifth area that could be researched is an exploration of the experience of those who choose to leave the student affairs profession after attending a preparation program and their development of self-authorship. All of the participants within this study obtained positions within student affairs as new professionals. How might the meaning-making development process be different for those who do not continue in the field?

Limitations

The findings of this study must be understood through the perspective of the limitations. The results are those of the participants who volunteered and completed the information form. Although speculation can be made as to why those who volunteered and completed the information form did, (e.g., they are more extroverted than those that did not), it is unknown what would have been discovered if additional participants had been included. It would have been ideal to collect the stories of all who graduated from the preparation program, adding depth and richness to the findings, and providing greater credibility to the study. It may have even resulted in

more or different findings. Additional credibility could also have been brought to the study if more than one student affairs preparation program was explored. Again, studying more than one program might have resulted in more or different findings.

Although my intentions were to interview the participants in person, only two of the eighteen interviews were conducted in person. I do believe that I established connections with those I interviewed over the phone; however, it is probable that I would have been able to obtain richer stories had the interviews been conducted in person. When I was able to conduct in person interviews I was able to get a better sense of nonverbal behavior, which allowed me the opportunity to follow up. Additionally, by not meeting in person to establish a trusting relationship, knowing that I am also a student affairs professional, and recognizing that the student affairs field is small and often interconnected, participants may have chosen to limit what they shared, especially as it related to negative or more sensitive experiences within the preparation program. At the same time, I did notice that when I met with my one participant in person a more informal relationship was established, creating an environment in which I was asked about my own experiences in student affairs preparation programs and as a practitioner. Answering such questions was not easy to navigate and a concern that weighed on me, as I did not want the participant to alter answers or not trust me because of what I shared.

Finally, by choosing to use self-authorship theory as a framework for studying self-authorship the limitations of this study became those of self-authorship theory. A major criticism of self-authorship theory is that it was created without much exploration regarding how individual's identities informed the development of the

meaning making process. Indeed, this criticism can be applied to this study. Although I included questions on the participant information form related to identity (i.e., race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation) and asked at least one question during the third interview specifically about identity, by using the theoretical framework of self-authorship to discuss my findings, I failed to examine critically the role of various identities and what they mean for how the participants came to make meaning. For example, Brandon spoke about his Black identity and his experiences with an African-American professor. I did not explore how Black identity development theory (Cross, 1995) might explain how he was making meaning. All of my participants were a part of the millennial generation, yet I did not explore how research about millennials (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Wilson, 2004) might inform how they understood their experiences. A final example: three of my participants were men, and I did not use research on masculinity (Davis, 2002) to explore what they shared about how they made meaning of their preparation program experiences. By choosing to use the framework of self-authorship theory for this study, I narrowed the possibilities for understanding how the participants were making meaning to those provided within self-authorship theory.

Strengths

One of the strengths of this study is the relationship that I developed with each of the participants. Often the participants would reflect on our previous interview and note if they had additional information that they wanted to share. They also seemed comfortable sharing details about what some might perceive to be more sensitive experiences, and were comfortable with the exploration I did into those experiences.

I also continually sent the participants their transcripts, as well as the final draft of their story in order to establish credibility, and the participants seemed to always take the time to read through what I had sent them and provide their comments.

Another strength of this study was the use of two peer debriefers. I came to truly appreciate their questions and comments, as they helped to keep my own assumptions in check. For example, they would each share with me when they thought I was inferring meaning that was not present in the participants' stories, or raise questions asking me to clarify more my analysis. Through their questions and comments, I became more clear both in articulating the participants' stories, as well as my own thoughts.

Using narrative inquiry as the methodology was also a strength because it allowed the participants to share their experience in the student affairs preparation program from their perspective. Although I considered conducting observation of the program, I am glad that I did not as it would have potentially clouded the experiences each participant shared with me, causing me to struggle even more to hear their story from their perspective. Using narrative inquiry as the methodology also allowed me to craft thick, rich descriptions of each participant's story, which contributes to the transferability of this study.

The diversity of the participants was another strength of this study despite it not being explored in the study. The participants easily had at least one unique experience in graduate school, and came from a variety of undergraduate backgrounds. Although there was limited racial diversity (only one participant was a person of color), there was good gender diversity (three males and three females). All

participants identified as heterosexual, and there was some diversity within social class with one participant identifying as lower class, one as upper class, and the rest as middle class. Diversity that was not directly sought out through the information form and participant sampling criteria included two of the participants coming directly into the student affairs preparation program from undergraduate school, while four brought with them work experience. Of the four who worked prior to entry into the preparation program, one did not work in a student affairs or a related position. All participants had assistantships (a requirement of the program) and two were at another institution. Although certainly not representative of all student affairs graduate students and the experiences offered through a student affairs preparation program, the participants and their experiences were a good sample from which to conduct this study.

Researcher Subjectivity

My researcher subjectivity, spoken about in greater detail within Chapter Three, was a strength and limitation of this study. The fact that I graduated from a student affairs preparation program meeting the requirements for program selection within this study made it so that I could relate to many of the experiences that the participants shared. I chose only to disclose the specific preparation program that I attended as a master's student if directly asked, not wanting to influence what participants shared. This was important since several of the participants had applied to the program from which I graduated, and I did not want to create a dynamic where they felt they had to hold back sharing their experience with me. I also recognize that by being able to relate to the experiences the participants had, I was continually

challenged to not assume or infer that I understood their experiences from their perspective.

My belief that individuals are on a continuum toward self-authorship regardless of their participation in a student affairs preparation program served as an assumption upon which this study was structured. This was both a strength and limitation. It was a strength in that it allowed me to be open to the participants' sharing of experiences that did not conclude with the participants being fully self-authored. On the other hand, this assumption caused me to be more closed off to the possibility that the participants might not be developing toward self-authorship.

Finally, my interest and work in the area of professional development (ACPA, 2008) is both a strength and a limitation. It is a strength in that it allows me to readily see implications for continued learning and growth in the work setting from the findings of this study. It is a limitation in that I must continually ensure that the implications I identify are grounded in the findings of the study and not in my own experience as a practitioner or the work I have done regarding professional development.

Summary

The results of this study indicated that movement was made toward self-authorship for some of the participants while in the student affairs preparation programs. The process of self-authorship included moving from second to third order, as well as moving from following external formulas through the crossroads to beginning the process of authoring one's life. Thus, the findings suggest that new professionals entering the field of student affairs who have graduated from a student

affairs preparation program have not yet reached self-authorship, and that their new work environment could be structured in a manner that allows for their continued movement toward self-authorship.

The results of this study also identified two environmental conditions that appear to promote the process of self-authorship: self-reflection and experiencing different perspectives. Several ways in which the participants sought support were also identified: pursuing personal academic interests, seeking external validation, seeking others help in processing, and observing. Both the environmental conditions and the ways of finding support were more intensely understood through the environment of reference model, learning partnerships model, and transition theory.

The relationship between the movement toward self-authorship and the environmental conditions, including the ways of finding support, within this study provides one perspective of the interaction between graduate students and the student affairs preparation program environment. Understanding this relationship provides insight into how preparation programs can intentionally promote the process of self-authorship for their students. It also provides perspective for those hiring graduates of preparation programs about what is needed within the environment to continue promoting the process of self-authorship.

Appendix A: Information Form

Thank you for your interest in my study. Please complete the information below if you would like to be considered for inclusion in this project. When completed please return in the mail using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

Name: _____ Undergraduate Major: _____

Local Address: _____

Email Address: _____

Preferred Telephone Number (is it OK to leave you a message at this phone number):

(____) _____ - _____ Message: Yes No

Race: _____ Ethnicity: _____

Gender: _____ Sexual Orientation: _____

Social Class (circle one):

lower lower/middle middle middle/upper upper

Information about your graduate school experience:

Classes you have taken other than those required in your program (title):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Practicum/Internship Experience(s):

Assistantship Experience(s):

Mentor(s):

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Thank you! Please return this form to your interviewer.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions Phase One: Getting Acquainted and Building Rapport

- Tell me about yourself and why you chose to get your masters in student affairs?
- Why did you choose this [insert name of school] graduate program?
- When you first started in your student affairs graduate program, what did you expect the experience to be like?
- What surprised you the most about your student affairs graduate program experience?
- What disappointed you the most about your student affairs graduate program experience?
- What are you the most proud of from your student affairs graduate program experience?
- Please identify for me significant experiences you had while in the student affairs graduate program.
- Please identify for me significant challenges you had while in the student affairs graduate program.

Interview Two Questions: Encouraging Reflection About Important Experiences

- Last time we met, you shared with me that the following were significant experiences for you while in the student affairs graduate program: [list what they said to question 8 during the first interview]. Selecting one of these experiences, can you tell me more about it and why it was significant for you?

Selecting another one of these experiences, can you tell me more about it and why it was significant for you?

- Last time we met, you shared with me that the following were challenges you had while in the student affairs graduate program: [list what they said to question 9 during the first interview]. Selecting one of these challenges, can you tell me more about it and why it was challenging for you? Selecting another challenge, can you tell me more about it and why it was challenging for you?
- What kind of support system did you have during graduate school?
- What role did your support system play in your student affairs graduate program experience?
- Graduate school can be a time in which you are exposed to new perspectives. Did you encounter new perspectives? Please tell me about them.
- How did encountering new perspectives influence the way you see things?

Interview Three Questions: Encouraging Interpretations of Reflections

- It sounds like you had a variety of experience in graduate school. How do you think the student affairs program experience has shaped who you are and the way you see yourself?
- Tell me about what you've learned about relating to others from your student affairs program experience.
- In what ways do you see yourself as the same as before you entered the student affairs graduate program?

- In what ways do you see yourself as different than before you entered the student affairs graduate program?
- How does your student affairs graduate program experience influence your everyday actions and decisions?
- In what ways has your identity shaped your student affairs experience?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience in your student affairs graduate program?

Continual Statements:

- Affirm what they shared.
- Reflect back to them what they are saying.
- Invite them to bring any reflections they might have to the next interview.

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