

PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES OF STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE ASSISTANTS  
IN RESIDENCE LIFE: UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES TO ENHANCE  
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

by

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## **Abstract**

Graduate assistants in residence life face many different challenges that are unique to their positions, and their wellness is critical to ensuring their place as competent professionals ready to serve students on university campuses. For the continued success and relevance of graduate assistantship positions in housing departments, it is critical that an effort be made to understand these student employees' experiences as they complete graduate study and are employed under various expectations that may be directly impactful to the manner in which they work with students. This report serves to understand the experiences of residence life graduate assistants to better prepare full-time professionals in supervising and supporting these individuals.

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## **Dedication**

“Like branches on a tree we grow in different directions, yet our roots remain as one. Each of our lives will always be a special part of the other.” —*Anonymous*

It is a pleasure and honor to dedicate this Master’s Report to my family. I am forever indebted to you for the moral and material support as well as the unconditional deep love you have given me throughout these long years of my education. Thank you.

## **Introduction**

The graduate assistantship (GA) position was originally created to provide an experience-based learning opportunity for students seeking to enter the profession of teaching and/or researching at the collegiate level (Lucas, 2006; White & Nonamaker, 2011). The intent behind creating these positions was focused on the professional development of the students as they prepared to assume the roles and responsibilities as not only faculty but also as the senior administrators governing the university campus (Nelson, 1995). Through the years, the university structure experienced multiple shifts in governing bodies, and thus the graduate assistantship position was modified into the student service role of various departments that it plays on thousands of campuses today. Student affairs graduate assistantships began to experience the ripple effect of universities' efforts to recruit more students and to serve their growing student populations. The position took on popularity across the field, placing graduate students in roles ranging from judicial affairs to student programming, and multicultural services to residence life.

Graduate assistants currently fill roles in various areas on campuses as assistantships have become common expectations and sometimes requirements of student affairs graduate programs. University departments often employ these graduate students to assist them in their pursuit of undergraduate student development and to fill duties and responsibilities that may often involve programming, advising, team building, student staff supervision as well as administrative tasks. For example, a graduate assistant working in campus activities may lead a programming committee, advise student leaders on that programming committee, and supervise undergraduate student staff that are employed by the same office while maintaining a set number of hours in-office each week.

Experiences such as the aforementioned attract student affairs graduate students for the knowledge of the profession that they often acquire through their work in these departments; however, students in these GA roles are not only drawn to the positions for the applicable practice opportunities and transferrable skills that they may provide. Graduate assistantships often offer attractive incentives for services including but not limited to tuition waivers, in-state tuition rates and stipends for part time service (Northwest Missouri State, 2012; University of



Central Missouri 2012; University of Kansas, 2012). Because of the nature of the position and its requirements, many graduate assistantships in residence life also require the graduate assistant to live on campus, and for this reason, most provide free room and board.

Of the variety of graduate assistantships offered, placement with residence life and housing services has typically been one of the more highly sought after positions for prospective graduate students in student affairs. These positions tend to offer several opportunities for experiences that can lead to proficiency in many of the expected competency areas of new professionals (Association of College Personnel Administrators & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010). These positions also tend to offer some of the most inconsistent and unstable work environments and expectations as well (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Residence Life graduate assistant responsibilities often include supervising a staff team of resident assistants, advising hall governing bodies of student leaders, adjudicating conduct hearings of hall residents, attending staff meetings and programs, interacting with residents on a regular basis, and maintaining the administrative expectations of their position (Northwest Missouri State, 2012; University of Central Missouri 2012; University of Kansas, 2012).

The philosophy behind the graduate assistantship role was developed to reflect the theory that valuable learning experiences take place not only inside the classroom for students, but outside of the classroom as well (Minkel, 1983). Specifically, the student affairs graduate assistantship experience is one that, when intentionally structured and rooted in experiential learning philosophy, can provide valuable theory-to-practice experience for the soon-to-be entry-level professionals, especially in residence life. These positions should be tailored to extend valuable opportunities to develop as a professional as well as opportunities for holistic growth that positively impact their practice with students in their future in the field. However, departments and individuals supervising graduate assistants in this functional area of student affairs experience barriers, both systemic and self-constructed, that might prohibit them from fully developing the graduate assistantship role into a rewarding and meaningful experience for those who assume the position.

## *Statement of Purpose*

There has been research conducted to understand if graduate assistantships are actually providing the field of student affairs with professionals who are truly prepared for the challenges and experiences they will face in their first years in the profession (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). However, there have been minimal efforts put forth to understand the varied experiences of graduate assistants in residence life. Few studies have sought to understand if their various experiences in residence life graduate assistantships lead these soon-to-be professionals to have desires of changing careers, even as early as before their first year as full-time professionals. Lorden (1998) investigated the issue of attrition in the field of student affairs, and indicated an astounding attrition rate of approximately 61% during the first six years in the profession. A primary goal of this masters report study is to discover if these career change ideations begin to surface during the years of graduate assistantship work.

An additional aim of this study is to discover shared themes within the experiences expressed from discussions with graduate assistants in residence life. This master's report seeks to investigate these issues by presenting the experiences of assistant residence life coordinator graduate assistants at a mid-sized, Midwest public institution. Through the examination of available literature along with understanding the various experiences of residence life graduate assistants, this report will be able to offer strategies for supervision as well as development and further definition of graduate assistantship roles in residence life.

Upon reviewing job descriptions and learning outcomes of several graduate residence life coordinator positions at various institutions similar to the university from which the data for this study was collected, this report will provide insight into the consistency of expectations across the field. From this review of job descriptions and learning outcomes, this report serves to provide suggestions to professionals on how they may be able to shape the graduate assistantship position to be consistent with the tenets of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory.

In conversations with graduate assistants who hold assistantship positions in residence life, and through understanding their expressions of being over-challenged and under-supported in the areas they defined as most necessary, an ancillary goal of this report is to advise housing professionals supervising graduate assistants as to how to provide an appropriate balance of challenge and support, which, according to theorist Nevitt Sanford (1966), is crucial for their

individual success. Finally, this report seeks to provide suggestions on how professionals supervising graduate assistants can aid in providing experiences and supervision efforts that provide a sense of meaning and significance in an institutional culture of mass-produced student services.

## **Review of Literature**

The body of literature related to student affairs graduate assistants' experiences in residence life roles is rather limited. The literature that is available most often is centered on experiences of professionals in multiple areas of student life (Lorden, 1995; Tull, 2006; Evans & Phelps Tobin, 1998). In order to better understand the experiences of residence life graduate assistants, my research was informed by literature surrounding the experiences of graduate students in student affairs roles, expectations of graduate assistants based on information made available in provided graduate assistant manuals and from job descriptions of the assistant residence life coordinator position, research-based implications for attrition of new professionals in the field of student affairs, and finally, the research of student development theorists that is supportive of the graduate assistantship being a meaningful and practical preparatory experience. This section provides an overview of the aforementioned relevant literature.

### **Challenges and Experiences of Student Affairs Graduate Assistants**

Experiences of graduate assistants vary greatly, however there have been efforts made in research to understand these students and their roles on university campuses. A concept that emerged amongst the literature regarding this particular group was the idea of obtaining a true balance in their positions. Grube, Cedarholm, Jones and Dunn (2005) defined balance as "finding a personal equilibrium in the four major life roles of family, work, leisure, and education" (p.152). The concept of true balance is an elusive one for full time student affairs professionals and even more seemingly out of reach for graduate assistants in residence life. The idea of balance is difficult to attain for graduate assistants who are enrolled in student affairs graduate programs. One of the common themes that became evident in this struggle was the experience of mixed-role conflict that became present as graduate assistants grappled with being both a student as well as a professional-in-training (Grube, et al., 2005).

The progression from undergraduate student, quite possibly with leadership positions, into graduate student assistant (often involving supervision of undergraduate students of similar ages) coupled with other life roles the student possesses becomes clouded and complicated by the new life challenge of “dual socialization,” a term used by Poock (2004) to describe individuals dealing with balancing both their academic and work responsibilities. Feelings of marginality may also arise as graduate assistants may express concerns of mattering as they face these new transitions. This is emphasized and arguably more significant for graduate students in residence life roles who often work through many unexpected and quite defeating challenges and experiences as semi-professionals at what seems to be the bottom rungs of the institutional hierarchy. According to Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, these challenges become more manageable as individuals find places in genuine caring environments and become connected with peers and mentors. Schlossberg also indicated that there is a connection between students’ academic persistence and their feelings of mattering.

Results of some interviews of students in graduate student affairs programs who simultaneously held assistantships in student affairs functional areas illuminated the ways in which some graduate students prioritized responsibilities and how they chose to achieve life balance (Grube, Cedarholm, Jones & Dunn, 2005). From these results, the individuals who were interviewed indicated that their academic responsibilities were always a top priority followed by their professional role responsibilities and then family and friends (Grube et al., 2005) The results of this study presented these themes as common experiences for graduate assistants in student affairs roles.

Beyond prioritizing role responsibilities, Grube and colleagues’ study (2005) also presented other issues that were found to be salient for student affairs graduate assistants in relation to their assistantships. These issues included: the seemingly innumerable tasks they are asked to complete in addition to their every-day role duties, and the required time-intensive coursework required by their graduate programs. They noted that the graduate program curriculum often includes a practicum or internship with multiple roles and responsibilities of its own (Grube et al., 2005).

Several resources of which graduate students can take advantage are available on university campuses. These resources include computer facilities, libraries, counseling,

nutritionists and recreation centers (Belson Howard, Jones, Nivens, & Stoller, 2010). Many graduate assistants in Belson and colleagues' study indicated that the hindrance in utilizing these resources was the lack of time to engage in such opportunities (Belson et al., 2010). The literature suggests that graduate students are more apt to address their assistantship requirements first and then their academic responsibilities, rather than taking the time to tend to their own wellbeing (Belson et al., 2010). This is a trend evident in the profession, and it seems to be a large contribution in the reasons graduate assistants struggle in finding life balance (Grube et al., 2005). With evidence of graduate students feeling overwhelmed, and lacking support and recognition, Belson and colleagues suggested that one would assume that staff members who interact with these graduate assistants are not aware of such issues (2010). However their interview process with these professionals provided evidence that these individuals are in fact well aware of the challenges these graduate assistants face. According to Belson and colleagues (2010), there is simply not enough being done to alleviate the stress and lack of support and resources that these individuals are experiencing. Similar themes emerged in my research conducted with Assistant Residence Life Coordinators.

### **Job Descriptions and Graduate Assistant Manuals**

Job descriptions of the Assistant Residence Life Coordinator graduate position are made readily available via several institutions' residential life and housing websites. In reviewing these job descriptions, it became clear that responsibilities across the board were very similar and included duties such as supervision of student staff, serving in an on-call capacity for the residence hall community, advising student leadership groups, maintaining administrative duties and tasks, managing hall programming budgets, and interacting with students on a regular basis (Northwest Missouri State, 2012; University of Central Missouri, 2012; University of Kansas, 2012). Given these expectations from the sole descriptive document of the graduate assistantship position, and upon having interviewed graduate assistant residence life coordinators for this particular study, an inconsistency between expectations and actual experiences was evident. Clarity in exactly where the lines of graduate assistant responsibilities end and professional full time responsibilities begin became a concern when reviewing the Assistant Residence Life Coordinator position descriptions. The plethora of responsibilities detailed, along with the "other

duties as assigned,” seem difficult to fit into a 20-30 hour workweek in which each position descriptions indicate.

The Auburn University graduate assistant handbook utilizes key concepts of Minkel’s work (1983) and explores the relationship of graduate assistantships and the departments in which they serve, indicating that a key responsibility of the graduate assistants is to serve their functional area while simultaneously maintaining academic progress in their degree program (Auburn University, 2012). The graduate assistant manual indicates that this is achievable, should the graduate assistantship workload be accommodating of the academic workload. But what does the relationship between the graduate assistant’s academic self and professional self look like when these two entities are significantly unbalanced, with the assistantship workload being disproportionately more time consuming and inconsiderate of academic responsibilities? It is rather easy to reach this imbalance in residence life where a live on position expects more “other duties as assigned” than typical positions.

Several other institutions offer graduate assistant manuals that further define the graduate assistantship position, responsibilities, rights, and learning outcomes of the incumbent. These documents can be useful to individuals considering assistantship positions in residence life; however, no graduate assistant manual or learning outcomes were made available from the institution from which I collected data from a sample population of graduate assistant residence life coordinators. The lack of such information became insightful upon interviewing its graduate assistants.

### **Attrition of Student Affairs Professionals**

The literature regarding student affairs professionals’ attrition is inconsistent (Tull, 2006; Lorden, 1998); however, job burnout, dissatisfaction and limited career mobility are all factors that contribute to many student affairs professionals’ decision to exit the field at a reported rate of 61% within in 6 years of entering the profession (Lorden, 1998). These challenges of professionals have been expressed from a significant number of sources, and though they are evident and detrimental to the future of the profession, issues ranging from lack of autonomy and personal growth to salary concerns are still prevalent and remain as cornerstones of professionals’ disenchantment with their positions and institutions. Graduate students who are

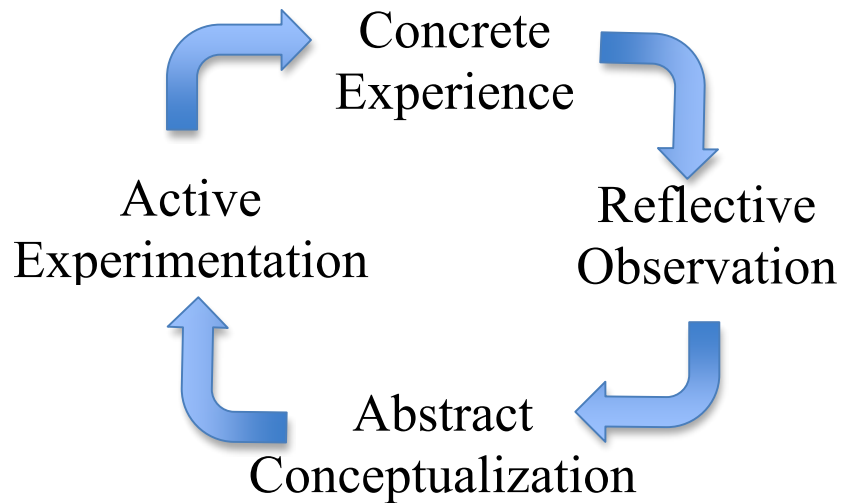
currently holding assistantships, specifically residence life assistantships, may be facing similar dissatisfaction; however, because of the awkward space that they occupy as both employees and students, they may encounter feelings of being unable to properly address these concerns.

In a study about the attrition of new professionals, several individuals reported stress and a desire to change jobs due to role ambiguity, overload, and incongruent expectations (Tull, 2003). Each of these issues presented have clear implications for the need of strategic and productive discussions of Senior Student Affairs Offices with regard to these concerns. These issues also bring forth the importance of student affairs preparation graduate programs discussing the reality of attrition with its students. Indeed, Lorden suggested, “Students should be encouraged to think about the many alternatives” (1998, p. 213).

### **Student Development Theories Applied to Graduate Assistantships**

Building on Dewey’s (1938) theory of experiential based learning, which states that learning is constructed from real life experiences, Kolb developed a model for the learning cycle, and purported that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 38). The four stages of the transformation process of learning, known as the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed by Kolb, show that learning occurs through first engaging in a *concrete experience*; *reflective observation*, which involves “observing and reflecting on these experiences from multiple perspectives” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p.139); developing an *abstract conceptualization* of events as they have occurred; and finally ending in an *active experimentation* stage in which the learner is able to translate and articulate the experiences in an effort to understand learning experiences in new situations in the future.

The graduate assistantship, if developed intentionally and with the graduate student’s professional development in mind, should mirror this learning process. According to Kolb, concrete experiences provide the basis for reflection. In the instance of the assistant residence life coordinator, the time spent in the graduate assistantship serves as the concrete experience providing opportunities to reflect upon and make meaning of practices. Upon reflection, the graduate assistant should be able to form an abstract conceptualization about the assistant residence life coordinator position and from that conceptualization, utilize the concepts formed to develop new theories and beliefs about their practice and its meaning.



**Figure 1 - Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory Model**

Given the fact that universities have become increasingly more fiscally conservative and are being asked to serve more students and to provide more services with a decreased amount of funding, the graduate assistantship experience has since been overshadowed and overwhelmed by these efforts to increase productivity at a significantly more cost effective rate.

Coupled with the understanding that the graduate assistantship position may have strayed from its original intent is the fact that graduate assistants have expressed feeling stressed by the work overload of their positions (Mazzola, Walker, Shockley, & Spector, 2011). Although the opportunities for professional development are a valued element of their assistantship roles, some graduate assistants expressed concern for the discord between the level of challenge and the level of support received in handling that challenge (Mazzola, et al.). Sanford's (1966) theory of challenge and support posits that students are able to handle a certain amount of challenge as long as they are provided an equal amount of support as a leveling tool in their learning experiences. However, Sanford also indicated that the challenge should not exceed points at which the student would become overwhelmed. This imbalance of challenge and support in the graduate assistantship role can result in the graduate student feeling not only overwhelmed, but



also unsupported and unfulfilled in the professional realm, and ultimately negatively affect the academic arena.

Assistantships play a critical role in the students' graduate experience and offer a unique "opportunity for socialization into the academic profession" (Ethington & Pisani, 1993, p. 344). Graduate assistantships in student affairs roles often offer professional development support to attend conferences relevant to the GA's position, as well as opportunities to be engaged in professional networks and organizations. Because of these opportunities, graduate assistants are able to become integrated into their professional society and to develop a professional identity, which supports student development theorist Astin's claim that students' involvement is paramount to their persistence and success within an institution (1984).

## **Qualitative Research Study**

### **Methodology**

This study was designed to understand the experiences of graduate assistants in assistant residence life coordinator positions to examine the dual role of being a student as well as a graduate assistant in residence life. Furthermore, this research sought to investigate whether the graduate assistantship experience in residence life could be applicable to the principles of the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) and to understand if graduate assistants in assistant residence life coordinator positions have thoughts of changing career paths because of their experiences in their assistantships. Because of the intent to deeply understand the experiences of individuals occupying the positions being studied, it was appropriate that this study be qualitative.

The interviews in this study were conducted in a manner that allowed the researcher to ask probing questions. Before interviewing, each participant signed an Informed Consent form (Appendix A). This form ensured the participants' willingness to voluntarily participate in the study as well as ensured confidentiality upon participating. Interview responses were recorded however were not transcribed.

## **Participants**

Participants of this study were three assistant residence life coordinators (ARLCs) at a mid-sized Midwestern institution who were simultaneously enrolled in the student affairs graduate preparation program at that particular institution. The residence life department from which the sample was identified employs graduate assistants in assistant residence life coordinator positions. In order to unveil commonalities in their experiences, the researcher chose to limit the study to only the graduate ARLCs who were in the second year of both their assistantship and academic program. Using this method of purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to identify three individuals who were willing to share their experiences. The researcher extended the offer to contribute to the study by emailing an invitation detailing the efforts of the study to individuals who fit the qualifications of the necessary sample. Of the five ARLC's contacted, three responded with willingness to be interviewed.

The participants showed hesitance in their willingness to be a part of the study and were apprehensive about how the data would be utilized and how they would be affected by it. For this reason, the names of participants were changed to pseudonyms to provide confidentiality and to protect the professional interests and networks of the individuals interviewed. One of the participants is female, and two are male. Each of the participants resides and works in a traditional residence hall setting and serves in the role of assistant residence life coordinator at the same higher education institution.

## **Procedure**

The interview process with each participant took place in a closed office space away from colleagues and employees of their housing department. The participants were asked a range of questions (Appendix B) that were centered on their experiences in their graduate assistantship roles along with being a graduate student. They were given the opportunity to willingly terminate or to opt out of answering any questions they deemed unnecessary or to which they felt uncomfortable responding. Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed in regards to the effort of collecting information for the study and were invited to review the study upon its final completion.

Upon reviewing the experiences expressed in the interviews, I chose to hand write notes about each participant's responses in a three columned chart in order to see where thoughts aligned and themes were expressed.

## **Results**

Responses to questions asked in this study presented themes relevant to the experiences of each of the assistant residence life coordinators, yet they also presented very unique experiences that were deemed significant and worthy of inclusion. For this reason, each of the three participants' experiences is highlighted in a vignette.

### ***Johanna***

*"Holy crap... I can't do this. It's way too much."*

Responses like those of Johanna are to be expected when reviewing the expectations and responsibilities of the assistant residence life coordinator position. When asked about what kind of responsibilities she may have been expecting regarding the ARLC position, Johanna indicated that the amount and the extent of the GA experience, ranging from administrative responsibilities to supervision, seemed wildly overwhelming from the position of resident assistant from which she had transitioned before her start as a graduate assistant.

Having excelled in her undergraduate student leadership positions in residence life, Johanna shared that these experiences gave her a sense of great accomplishment and fueled her desire to work with people, which ultimately became her motivation to pursue student affairs as a career. She brightened up when sharing her experiences as having impacted students in positive ways; however, she readily admitted that parts of her graduate assistantship experience left much to be desired in terms of fulfilling her needs both socially and professionally.

"One of the biggest challenged I've faced here so far, surprisingly, has been with the cohort," Johanna stated. She continued on to discuss her struggles with developing and maintaining genuine relationships in a culture of competition while managing her transition into an entirely new community. The cohort Johanna mentioned is comprised of the individuals that work alongside her in residence life and who also are in the very same graduate program of which she is a part. Other members of this cohort were interviewed for this study and strikingly

similar issues with peers were a central theme to the challenges discussed regarding their graduate assistantships. Johanna's experiences with the cohort involved struggling to define relationships outside of the work and academic arenas and then feeling disappointedly unfulfilled when these relationships failed to develop for each individual who was experiencing their very own unique transitions as a new graduate student. "I just expected certain things from my peers and when they didn't fulfill that. I didn't know how to cope because I felt all alone," Johanna shared. These failed friendships took on new light as they developed into a brand of competition amongst peers that Johanna expressed as being unique to the residence life graduate assistants with whom she worked. She struggled to understand and to define relationships with peers as certain cliques formed while some were deemed as the out-group and others became close. Johanna shared that the feeling of being a close knit, family-like department that had been advertised to her prior to accepting the ARLC position seemed like a lie and was lost in what she perceived to be a contrived professional setting.

For Johanna, balance was also a key issue mentioned when discussing the greatest challenges she had faced while serving as an ARLC. The concept of balance was something that she stated that her department struggled with: "No one sat me down and said, 'This is what balance looks like... You're *only* supposed to work 20 hours per week, and not a minute beyond that.'"

Given the amount of responsibilities, Johanna indicated that it was easily possible to work the entire 24 hours of a day and still find more to do for her assistantship alone. Johanna shared that she burned out very quickly in the beginning of her assistantship because of the lack of balance, but from this burn-out, she learned the hard but valuable lesson that having a personal life was a right to which she was entitled even as a graduate assistant. She needed to be clear about setting boundaries and indicating her priorities.

From the conversation with Johanna, it became evident that her ARLC role was a rather time-consuming commitment, and when asked how many hours she worked beyond the indicated maximum of her assistantship contract, she responded with a defeated tone of annoyance: "Some weeks it could be five; other weeks it could be 20." Johanna shared that her assistantship required that she post 10 hours in office each week between 8am-5pm, that were dedicated to working with students—this work being defined as having judicial conduct

meetings, building relationships with students, answering questions and more. The other 10 hours of her position were apportioned to and completely consumed by having “1 on 1” meetings with her resident assistant staff. It became hard for Johanna to adhere to twenty hours and to maintain personal and work life balance, simply due to the fact that her students’ schedules rarely ever coincided with her own. She found herself having conduct meetings, 1 on 1’s, and staff meetings during dinner hours and at later hours in the evenings. These hours did not account for the time Johanna was required to spend working on departmental committee assignments that were time-consuming and required her to be away from her office oftentimes during the day and very often on weekends.

With the amount of responsibility she had because of her role, it is a wonder Johanna remained academically successful. Johanna stated that her academic life was a back burner issue until she initiated conversations about it with her supervisor. Feeling supported and valued as a graduate assistant was a feeling that was not in great supply for Johanna, who indicated that her supervisor, although one of the more seasoned veterans of the department, did not do the best job in communicating value with her. Although this issue had yet been resolved in her second year of her ARLC position, Johanna was grateful to attribute her ability to continue on in her position to her students and the interactions she had with them. She stated that from these interactions, she was constantly affirmed that she was making an impact, which was her initial reason for entering the profession and for pursuing a housing graduate assistantship.

“The truth is, I know I’m replaceable. Anybody can take my job and do what I’m doing,” Johanna stated in response to being asked how valued she felt as a graduate assistant in her particular department of residence life. It was made evident that the leadership team of her department struggled when it came to expressing value and appreciation to graduate assistants. The lack of expression of value and meaning was attributed simply to the fact that Johanna did not believe that the leadership team of her department really had the time to support them in such ways or to place as much value as she would have like to have experienced as a graduate assistant.

Prior to assuming the role of ARLC throughout her graduate assistantship experience, Johanna desired to build a thriving career in student living. However, when asked about her

professional goals now and how they have been impacted by her ARLC experience, Johanna stated, “There have been points at which I’ve said, ‘I don’t think I can do this anymore... being on duty is not something I want to do for the rest of my life, neither is dealing with crisis.’”

Johanna’s professional goals prior to serving in the ARLC position shifted slightly since entering the role of ARLC and took on more of a focus of serving students through academic advising or career services rather than through residence life. Although her desire to no longer work in a residential capacity is made evident, Johanna accredited the positive experiences she has had with students in residence life as having a significant impact on her recent career decisions.

Ultimately from the challenges she has faced with her cohort as well as with finding balance in a position that seems never-ending, Johanna proudly expressed that, in spite of her struggles, her graduate assistantship has afforded her the tangible benefit of being able to graduate from a master’s program debt free. Additionally, she stated that her assistantship provided her with the gift of herself: “Because of the cohort challenge and the work balance struggle, it really created more of a sense of independence and the realization that I am capable of doing more than I ever felt I could.... I was forced to polish the skill of supporting myself.”

### ***Maxwell***

*“The key to understanding balance is knowing that there is no such thing in this position.”*

Similar to his colleague Johanna, depending on the week, Maxwell worked about 5-20 hours beyond the indicated 20-hour maximum of his graduate assistantship. He reflected on his experience in the position and stated, “It’s now unrealistic to think that I would spend 30 hours at home and 20 hours at work in one week. It’s more about being effective with the small amount of time that I do have.” However, he also admitted that his position did place upon him a significantly larger number of commitments than he was originally expecting. Discussions about his expectations towards his position, Maxwell expected to work over 20 hours in some weeks, yet he was definitely not expecting to work beyond his 20 hour weekly maximum as frequently as he does nor was he expecting to work close to 40 hours each week.

Maxwell's challenge with finding balance is reflective of the graduate assistantship role in residence life and is evident as he willingly admitted that the biggest challenge he has faced in both of his years as an ARLC has been with taking opportunities to remain mentally, emotionally, personally, and academically well. Maxwell also shares that his relationships with others have endured strain of some sort due to the significant amount of time he spends working in his ARLC role. He admits to not having nearly enough personal time to read, to travel or to visit with friends because of the amount of hours he works with and for students, the departmental committee tasks that are separate from his day-to-day work as an ARLC, as well as the sheer intensity of his job. "The department relies on graduate students *a lot*, which is great because I've professionally evolved, but I've also personally suffered," he shared.

Maxwell also expressed feelings of being expected to do "grunt work" in his position at times. When asked about the level of professional respect he received as a graduate assistant in his department, this thought coincided with the feeling that some professionals in his department did not truly value his experience or what he had to offer as a new professional. He felt as though he was valued as a member of his department and as a graduate student but only by a small number of professionals. He shared his understanding that some professionals have a holistic view of the graduate student and the graduate assistantship position, and therefore, the treatment he receives from these professionals is reflective of this. However, this is not always the case. Generally, he felt that many professionals held on to a culture of tradition and history that had been engrained in the department, and for this reason, did not find value in the graduate assistants' positions, experiences, or opinions when working with students.

Maxwell also felt a lack of support from his supervisor and department with regard to his status as a student. He felt that the general consensus on the graduate assistantship position was that graduate assistants are considered to be employees first; the job should take precedence and if/when the time allows, school commitments can then be completed. Citing a specific example, Maxwell spoke about his supervisors, "Although [they] asked for my syllabi, and schedules of when things are due, [and they] do nothing to support making sure I have time to actually do those things."

Feeling similarly to his colleague Johanna, Maxwell experienced a struggle in building, understanding, and nurturing relationships with peers in his cohort. He attributed this challenge to the fact that all of the cohort members were still struggling to find out exactly who they were professionally and academically and to accomplish the roles that they had assumed. However, differing from Johanna, Maxwell had managed to build some stable relationships with a few peers, and from this group, felt a satisfactory level of support.

Despite the challenges he has faced in taking on the large workload of his position, including finding a comfortable and achievable concept of balance and the struggle in being professionally and academically supported, Maxwell shared that there are multiple invaluable benefits that he has received from the experience. Most importantly is the positive effect that the graduate assistantship has had on his preparedness for full time work. He states that his position has given him not only the opportunity to see the potential in collaboration of residence life with departments across campus, something with which his department excels, but his experience working with several differently skilled professionals has given him an understanding of the kind of student affairs administrator he does and does not wish to become.

Although he is pursuing a full time residence life coordinator professional position immediately following graduate school, Maxwell also indicated a desire to eventually change areas of student affairs. He does not wish to leave student affairs completely, but he stated that he ultimately wishes to serve in a different functional area in the field. He accredits this change of professional goals to the experiences he has had while working with students in his graduate assistantship.

### ***Bennett***

*“I don’t really think I’ve achieved balance at this point... I don’t really know that it is possible.”*

Surprisingly, not every ARLC in this department and cohort struggled with the same issues on such a large scale. Much like his ARLC counterparts, Bennett’s attempts to juggle an academic workload along with the responsibilities of his assistantship have been the most challenging aspect of being a graduate assistant in residence life. However, for Bennett, his experiences have been more rewarding than more of a struggle. In his position, Bennett admits to not having experienced struggles building relationships with peers but understands what



challenges that may pose in one's transition into the ARLC role. From conversations with Bennett, it became critical to the research that I understood why his experience has been quite different from other participants.

Bennett's experience as an ARLC has not been effortless; however, he shared that he was fortunate to have a supervisor who understood his status as a student. He also stated that "there is a job to do and things that need to get taken care of" when asked about his perception of being valued as a graduate student. Although he feels as though the level of responsibilities that he has are equal to that of a full time professional, which can be overwhelming at times, he ultimately feels that it will benefit him in the long run and that his experiences as a graduate assistant residence life coordinator have served as valuable preparation for the full time positions he intends to pursue.

One thing Bennett seems to share in common with his colleagues interviewed in this study is that defining what the concept of balance looked like for him as a student and employee was almost impossible. He held a unique outlook on his experience as an ARLC but was open in sharing that the class load is not overwhelmingly challenging, but coupled with work, he said, "It's enough to always have something to do." Bennett admitted to placing family relationships and friendships to the side and having these connections become negatively impacted because of the commitment to complete his work responsibilities. He shared that his effort to gain balance has changed focus as he has progressed in his ARLC position: "I spent the first year focusing a lot on learning the position, academics and dealing with transition. And the second year is now being spent job searching, completing practicums, and preparing for comprehensive exams, so the balance issue is always going to be there."

Bennett was unsure of what to expect in his assistantship; however, he anticipated 25-30 work hours per week completing the tasks outlined in his job description. He admitted that, in reality, his position requires him to work 40 hours a week in order to successfully complete the responsibilities expected of him.

As a resident assistant at his undergraduate institution, Bennett fell in love with working with students, and he shared that this love has not changed. Only he is fortunate in that his passion has been amplified by the experiences he has received in his assistantship. Bennett stated that his professional goals when he first began the ARLC position were to gain a more thorough

understanding of residence life and its functions as well as to learn what building an inclusive community would look like. To Bennett, these goals have been achieved through his assistantship. Though he currently seeks a full time residence coordinator position to begin his career, when looking into his future in student affairs, he confidently stated that residence life would not always be a part of that picture. Interestingly, he is uncertain that this desire to eventually leave housing is actually due to his assistantship experience.

## **Discussion**

Many conclusions can be drawn upon reviewing the responses of participants and their relation to the existing literature. The participants who were interviewed all expressed that they had experienced struggles in developing a clear concept of balance. It became evident that the definition of balance was unique to each individual and was very much related to his or her interpretation of his or her experience as a graduate assistant residence life coordinator. While Johanna's struggle with balance involved her being challenged to maintain relationships with students and to complete the functions of her job within a reasonable time while remaining personally well, Maxwell's issues with balance involved more of a struggle with learning where exactly to place his academic duties in his hierarchy of responsibilities. Bennett, who also faced issues with finding balance, seemed to interpret them quite differently. Maintaining an understanding that balance would always be an issue for individuals in this role, Bennett felt that the particular space one occupied in the assistantship role would determine what that particular struggle looked like.

A significant theme that emerged in the responses of the ARLC's was that being recognized as a student as well as an employee was a critical necessity to success in their position; two out of three participants stated that this support was lacking in some capacity and was incongruent to the level of challenge that was placed upon them from their direct supervisors. Each participant experienced stress and role conflict in relation to his or her mixed role responsibilities. Grube and colleagues clarified the concept of role conflict by defining it as an experience in which the graduate assistant faces conflict brought on by their role of being both a student and a professional (2005).

The experiences of the participants' graduate assistantships were contributors to their value of work in student life and were seen as transferrable and significant to their careers, regardless of the functional areas in which they ultimately aimed to work. Each participant expressed a desire to eventually leave the area of residence life, but not necessarily the field of student affairs entirely. Participants' decisions to remain in the field of student affairs on a long-term basis were consistent with the research conducted by Taub and McEwen (2006) that assessed the confidence and likelihood of student affairs graduate students to remain in the profession. Respondents in their study reported a high level of confidence that they would remain in student affairs as a long time professional.

Although the graduate assistants in this study have chosen to remain in the profession, they each shared a common desire to eventually leave residence life. Tack (1991) expressed that the field of higher education imposes unreasonably high expectations and demands on its administrators, and as a result, could be driving away talented leaders. The same could be said about residence life. Graduate assistants and new professionals in this field often struggle with their ability to separate their lives from their profession, and as individuals in a helping field many of whom who hold live-on/in positions, they face difficulty in setting and articulating their boundaries. Tack (1991) suggested a need to restructure priorities and challenged the profession to find solutions to the seemingly everlasting issue of balance for student affairs professionals. Tack also stated that universities and their executives expect professionals to devote significant portions of their lives to the profession. However, if in the future the field aims to retain its dedicated professionals, this concept is one that should be dismissed in recognition that such lifestyles are unhealthy and imbalanced, and through maintaining such dispositions about its professionals, universities will struggle in maintaining talented leadership.

Finally, a positive theme that was present in each participant's responses was the fact that their desire to have meaningful interactions with students is what fueled their decision to enter the field of student affairs, and their assistantship had consistently provided opportunities to view and to understand the impact that they were making with residents in their respective halls. Each ARLC found this to be an invaluable benefit of their assistantship experience and subsequently a major contributor to their satisfaction and efficacy in the role.

## **Recommendations for Future Practice**

The participants of this study each reported struggling with defining and achieving balance. It is problematic that professionals in supervisory positions are often aware of the balance challenge faced by ARLCs, yet they play a limited role in offering useful advice in assisting their employee. A recommendation for future practice in supervising graduate assistants in residence life is for full time professionals to make efforts to become more than just aware of the challenges the ARLC is facing but to be able to actively and effectively support the graduate assistant in alleviating stress by offering practical strategies to separate the work life and personal life of the graduate assistant. Residence life departments and supervisors of graduate assistants can play a role in ensuring the wellness of their graduate staff by providing concrete strategies and definitions of balance that are consistent department-wide. It is also critical to the graduate assistants' success in their positions that they are able to see full time staff not only suggesting strategies for maintaining a healthy and balanced professional life but also to see these professionals actually utilizing such strategies and working to define boundaries for themselves. Departments can begin to express their dedication to helping their graduate assistants maintain balance by requiring them to maintain detailed time reports outlining the activities and responsibilities that they worked on in a particular day or week. If graduate assistants kept such a log of activities, departments could see how consistently its graduate assistants are working beyond the 20-hour weekly maximum. Then, justification would be present for restructuring some of the responsibilities and initiatives for which the graduate residence life coordinator is responsible. Maintaining time reports also allows the graduate assistants to understand where the majority of their time is being spent and offers growth opportunities in time management as those individuals learn, with support of a supervisor, how to be the most productive in a regulated work day.

As a supervisor, an important responsibility is to help the graduate assistants make meaning of their experiences as they are transitioning from one role into a new position with several more responsibilities in many different facets of life. Support of the graduate assistants in this process may include asking genuine and caring questions about their academic life and how, as a supervisor, one could help support them in their academic program.

Supervisors can also help the graduate assistants make meaning from their experience by being intentional in efforts to bridge theory and practice. This may involve residence life departments developing collaborative partnerships with student affairs graduate programs in efforts to help professionals familiarize themselves with the material that is being discussed in the academic arena and how they can offer professional development opportunities that complement the learning outcomes of the academic program. It is critical to the functioning of a good supervisory relationship that professionals supervising graduate assistants remain current and knowledgeable about student issues in the field of higher education; to understand students is to understand the graduate assistant. Maintaining constant contact between the hiring department and the academic department is critical in this effort. This strategy can be achieved through a variety of ways including hosting professional development seminars on supporting graduate assistants for full time professionals and faculty members, developing a periodic publication to be released to departments with graduate assistants detailing current topics being discussed in the academic realm, and offering suggestions and opportunities for the graduate assistants to build further knowledge in those areas.

Another strategy for future practice would be for upper level administrators in residence life departments to discuss developing clear boundaries and distinct responsibilities between full time and graduate assistant staff members. Participants of the study indicated that there were often ambiguous lines of separation between the responsibilities of a full time staff member and the responsibilities of a graduate assistant. Defining the responsibilities and developing corresponding learning outcomes for each graduate assistantship position can be useful to the graduate assistants as they define exactly what they want their experience to look like. Many graduate assistantship positions offer a list of outcomes or specific mission statements that are relevant to the position and to the needs of a graduate assistant as they work to become new professionals. The institution at which I did my research did not offer such resources. By developing a list of goals and outcomes for the position, the full time individuals supervising the graduate assistants are able to guide their experiences and ensure the most efficient yet fulfilling opportunities for the individuals in the assistantship role.

Two out of the three participants interviewed discussed challenges in developing and maintaining healthy peer-relationships with graduate staff colleagues. A recommendation for

future practice to alleviate the stress associated with peer-centered struggles would be for professional full time staff to be diligent in their work to minimize competition amongst graduate staff members by fostering a supportive cohort environment in which each member is distinctly valued as an individual as well as a part of the group. Along with providing the aforementioned learning outcomes that are to be associated with the position, it would be deemed good practice for the supervisor of the graduate assistant to have meaningful conversations with the graduate assistant about developing individualized professional goals and how they will be able to tailor the experience to be distinct and complementary with such goals. Individualizing the experience for the graduate assistant, while maintaining departmental standards of balance and clear boundaries between graduate and full time responsibilities, can tremendously assist in the graduate assistant's professional development and lessen the interpersonal conflicts that occur when cohort members vie for the same pool of recognition, resources and rewards.

A foreseeable challenge in working to alleviate the interpersonal struggles that occur between graduate assistant colleagues would be the effort to understand if these challenges are current in every cohort of graduate assistants as well as if they are present in departments outside of residential life or even at different institutions. It is possible that these specific struggles and their severity are unique to this particular department at this university and to this specific group of graduate assistant colleagues. For this reason, peer professional relationship development is a suggestion for potential future research.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

A common challenge that arose for the graduate assistants that were interviewed in this study was the fact that they worked a significant number of hours beyond the indicated 20-hour maximum of their employment contracts. Participants indicated that at least half of the responsibilities of their positions would not be able to be completed if they were to only work 20 hours in a week, so the only alternative in order for them to attain their definition of success in their graduate assistantship positions was to work 10-20 hours beyond the 20 hour limit for which they were paid and that classified them as a part time employee. A potential study that arose from this issue would be to perform research to understand the relationship between the professional value of the experience and the (compensatory) value of being a graduate assistant.

Another study that could potentially add to the research on student affairs graduate assistants would be to conduct surveys to understand the generational idea of what it means to be a successful student affairs practitioner and how their suggested competencies align (if at all) with the competencies of the professional organizations (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). The competencies of NASPA and ACPA provide a basis for which student affairs graduate preparation programs and assistantships should encourage growth amongst their students. Although these competencies were developed to provide consistency in expectations across the field, the millennial generation that occupies the profession of student affairs currently may have different ideas of what it means to be competent and successful in their roles as student affairs professionals, and for this reason, it would be valuable to conduct a study to assess these concepts and their correspondence with the goals of the national associations.

All of the participants in this study stated that they worked at least 35-40 hours each week. As finances continue to be a significant issue for institutions as well as for students, another study that would contribute to the research on student affairs graduate students would be to make an effort to understand if graduate assistantships are as useful as they once were. If students are already working 40 hours in an assistantship, it would be helpful to understand what the competencies and academic success of student affairs graduate students who choose to work full time while pursuing graduate degrees rather than obtaining an assistantship look like versus those who decided to pursue graduate assistantship work.

The graduate assistants interviewed expressed concerns with developing and maintaining genuine relationships with their peer group. Given the large amount of graduate assistants hired for different positions within this particular institution's student living department, these graduate students became clustered as an unofficial cohort and subsequently matriculated through their graduate program as well as through work as a group. In an effort to contribute to the understanding of the graduate assistant experience, it would be helpful to conduct research on the development of professional relationships amongst peers in graduate assistantship roles. This area of research seems to be untouched and would add valuable perspective to the knowledge that exists surrounding these unique experiences.

The challenges expressed by the participants of this study are not completely unique to these three individuals, to their generation, to their department, or to their institution. Although limited, there has been other research conducted to understand the challenges faced by student

affairs graduate assistants (Belson, 2010; Grube et al., 2005; White & Nonamaker, 2011). A contribution to this body of research could be made by working to understand the practices of graduate assistant supervisors who put their GAs through the same rigorous and emotionally draining experiences they once experienced during their time as GAs, as they offer lackluster efforts of support and attempt to pass off the stressful experiences as “paying dues” to the profession. From my personal interactions with current student affairs professionals, I have come to believe that these professionals’ graduate experience brought forth hardships of some kind, and from experience, it has been understood as common culture in student affairs to perpetuate the same challenges for new graduate assistants year after year. For this reason, an interesting topic of study that could be pursued in the future would be to understand the continuation of bad practices of student affairs administrators who supervise graduate assistantships and if these experiences could be deemed a form of bullying in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

As the common themes that emerged indicate, there is much to take into consideration when supervising student affairs graduate assistants in residence life. As these graduate assistants prepare to serve as full time professionals in the field, potentially supervising graduate assistants in the roles they pursue beyond graduate school, it is imperative that their current assistantship supervisors play a very strategic role in what their graduate assistantship experience looks like. Within residence life, the boundaries are rather indistinct because professionals live and work in the same areas. For the development of the graduate assistant position and for successful experiences in the role, learning very early on how to create boundaries where they seem to not exist is critical. Supervisors of residence life graduate assistants should pay particular attention to the transition of these individuals into their new roles. It is also imperative that supervisors be a source of reflection for the healthy and balanced lifestyle that they encourage graduate assistants to pursue.



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# **Appendix A - Informed Consent Form**

## **KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT**

**PROJECT TITLE:** Perspectives and Challenges of Student Affairs Graduate Assistants in Residence Life: Understanding Experiences to Enhance Professional Practice

**APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT:** 12/24/12

**EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:** 12/24/13

### **INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Christy Moran Craft

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### **IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:**

- Rick Scheidt, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 1 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224
- Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice Provost for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 1 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

**SPONSOR OF PROJECT:** TBD

### **PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of graduate assistants in residence life positions who are simultaneously enrolled in student affairs graduate preparation programs and to identify how those experiences impact future decisions to remain in the profession of student

affairs. This information will be used to identify common themes in the residence life graduate student experiences and propose ideas for improved future practice.

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:**

Participants in this study include graduate assistants of the Housing and Dining department who are also degree-seeking Masters students of the College Student Development program at Kansas State University. As a participant, you will engage in one interview over the course of the 2013 Spring semester. Each interview time will vary depending on the length of conversation and responses given by the participants and will be held in a public location of your choosing. This interview will be a one on one interaction and will be tape-recorded, however not transcribed verbatim.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO THE PARTICIPANT: N/A**

**LENGTH OF STUDY:** Each interview will take place in the Spring 2013 semester. Though your role in the study will end upon completion of the interviews, you will be invited to review the research findings if desired.

**RISKS ANTICIPATED:** There are no foreseeable risks of participation in this project.

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** You will benefit personally by engaging in conversation of experiences that will lend to the perspective of the research and help to offer strategies for better professional practice.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** Only the investigator will know your identity. At the time of the first interview, a pseudonym will be given to you. That pseudonym will be used during the analysis phase of the study as well as in the written report of the findings. Your name will not be associated with your responses.

**COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:**

N/A

**PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: N/A**

**TERMS OF PARTICIPATION:**

*I understand that this project is research and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.*

*I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.*

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness to Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B - Research Questions**

- What has been the most challenging aspect of being a graduate assistant in residence life?
- Why did you pursue a housing assistantship?
- What rewards or benefits have you gained from your graduate assistantship in residence life?
- How many hours beyond the indicated maximum of your employment contract do you work for your graduate assistantship each week?
- What level of professional respect do you receive from professionals in your department?
- How well do you feel supported by the professionals in your department (including your supervisor) with regard to your status as a student in a graduate program?
- How valued do you feel as a graduate assistant in residence life?
- What were your professional goals when you started graduate school?
- What are your professional goals now and how, if at all, has your graduate assistantship in residence life affected these goals?
- How, if at all, has your graduate assistantship affected your personal life with regard to relationships, family, personal time, and well being, and in what ways?