

INFLUENCE OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AFFAIRS COURSEWORK ON UNDERGRADUATE ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the preparation of student affairs professionals has evolved. Historically, curricular professional preparation existed solely at the graduate level. Today, there is a growing trend around designing and offering undergraduate student affairs coursework (UGSAC) packaged as stand-alone electives, minors, certificates, or concentrations within existing baccalaureate programs. Participants with experience in UGSAC and who had matriculated into or recently completed their master's in a student affairs preparation program described how UGSAC learning had a positive impact on their college experience as well as how they were able to contribute to their peers' college experience. The participants of the study described being able to immediately apply their learning to decisions about their involvement and engagement on campus, explained that UGSAC was useful in refining their leadership abilities, allowing them to intentionally apply their learning from UGSAC into practice, and described how UGSAC helped them better understand themselves and make meaning of their identities and lived experiences.

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In the early 1990's, Richmond and Sherman (1991) deemed student affairs to be a "hidden profession" (p. 8) due to the absence of formal undergraduate preparation to lead students to the field. Yet, since the early 2010's, the field has seen a growth of undergraduate student affairs coursework (UGSAC) being developed and offered on college campuses (Nelson, 2020). Although UGSAC options remain limited, the presence of UGSAC curricular options have made the student affairs profession more visible earlier in a college student's career exploration process thus changing the pathway to student affairs preparation (McKenzie et al., 2017; Nelson, 2020). Historically, curricular professional preparation existed solely at the graduate level (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2019). Today, there is a growing trend around designing and offering UGSAC packaged as stand-alone electives, minors, certificates, or concentrations within existing baccalaureate programs (Nelson, 2020).

As a new area of professional preparation, there is limited research on the influence of UGSAC on students' decision to pursue a career in student affairs (McKenzie et al., 2017; Nelson, 2020), and there is an absence of studies focusing on the influence of UGSAC on students while they are in college. Students may find their way to UGSAC through their involvement experiences and mentoring relationships with student affairs professionals just as they do as they find their way to the field in general (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006). With the current UGSAC options emerging (Nelson, 2020), the purpose of this study is to understand the engagement experiences of students who participated in UGSAC. To meet the purpose of this study, we designed an exploratory qualitative study around this central research question: What are the engagement experiences of students who participate in UGSAC?

This research is timely for several reasons. First, because of the emergent nature of UGSAC, there is currently a dearth of scholarly exploration into this undergraduate curriculum and its pos-

sibilities. Second, with the field of student affairs currently challenged by declining rates of entry of new professionals and issues retaining current student affairs professionals (NASPA, 2022), finding new ways to extend the career pipeline through UGSAC could contribute to addressing these concerns. Third, as researchers and scholar-practitioners continue to imagine new ways of meaningfully engaging undergraduate students, perhaps UGSAC, or elements of UGSAC, might illuminate viable opportunities. Finally, despite the lack of scholarly research on the topic, UGSAC seems to remain a contested issue in the profession (Stoller, 2015). Therefore, it is useful to squarely examine the influence of UGSAC on students who have successfully completed this coursework to fully understand its utility and potential.

Literature Review

The review of literature begins with a foundational understanding of the purpose of professional preparation for the field of student affairs to provide context for how UGSAC fits within the well-established graduate-level educational preparation. Next, an overview of the limited research focused on UGSAC is provided to demonstrate how this study builds upon initial explorations of the experience. Finally, the focus of the manuscript, undergraduate student engagement research, is presented to explore the connections between academic and co-curricular learning.

Student Affairs Professional Preparation

Throughout the existence of the student affairs profession, scholars have tried to examine, understand, and analyze how to prepare student affairs professionals so that they can effectively serve students attending institutions of higher education. Wrenn (1949) originally called on the profession to establish a set of professional competencies alongside consistent professional preparation expectations. Decades later, in 1986, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Ed-

education (CAS) crafted its first set of standards designed to guide graduate programs in preparing student affairs professionals. The CAS Standards for Master's Preparation Programs (CAS, 2019), currently in their eighth iteration, alongside the ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), significantly inform the ways in which student affairs graduate preparation programs educate emerging student affairs professionals. Preparation programs at the graduate school level have historically been the primary approach to educating professionals for student affairs careers.

Researchers have tried to ascertain the impact of professional preparation in the field of student affairs. For example, the researchers in one study found that professionals who had gone through graduate preparation were entering the field with a greater sense of self-authorship, feeling confident about themselves and their place in the field of student affairs (Shetty et al., 2016). On the other hand, Boss et al. (2018) found that early-career professionals were experiencing challenges in operationalizing social justice outcomes as a part of their student affairs practice, which could be attributed to a gap in their graduate preparation. These studies provide a further understanding of how graduate preparation experiences contribute to readiness for student affairs roles and responsibilities.

Other scholars have sought to directly examine the effectiveness of professional preparation by examining the transition of 90 new student affairs professionals into their first job in the profession (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). This examination led to recommendations to improve graduate preparation programs, including helping students understand their individual professional identities, enhancing their awareness and skills with respect to navigating the political environments of colleges and universities, and more effectively utilizing supervisors and mentors (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Taking a different approach, Ardoin and colleagues (2019) examined senior

student affairs officers' (SSAOs) perspectives on professional preparation offered in student affairs graduate programs. With respect to curriculum around foundational knowledge as well as the practical experiences many programs offer, the SSAOs found value in this. However, the SSAOs worried that there was not enough training on organizational and administrative concepts, and, ultimately, graduates were leaving their programs with an idealized version of the profession (Ardoin et al., 2019). Understanding that a major part of professional preparation is the practical application of knowledge, a strength of graduate programs according to the aforementioned study, Young (2019) surveyed student affairs graduate program alumni and found that supervised practicum and internship experiences increased their confidence in leadership skills, ability to translate theory to practice, and their overall career readiness.

Ultimately, the quest to enhance student affairs professional preparation has led to greater commitments to competency-based training (Eaton, 2016). Moreover, recommendations for future research on professional preparation often point to the need to assess and measure outcomes related to the aforementioned competencies and standards (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Young & Dean, 2015). Scholars have yet to grapple with the purpose, objectives, outcomes, or influence of UGSAC and how it fits into the larger picture of preparing future student affairs professionals.

Undergraduate Student Affairs Coursework (UGSAC)

UGSAC has been established to introduce undergraduate students to the student affairs profession in a more formal, curricular way in the undergraduate environment (Nelson, 2020) instead of relying on the widely used approach of exposure to the profession through undergraduate student leadership roles (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006), which can lead to hazardous and inconsistent socialization. Profession-

al mentors also often serve as important influences in students' desire to pursue a career in student affairs (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006), but these mentorship experiences also occur in informal ways that limit access to student populations unable to devote time to co-curricular engagement. However, graduate level preparation continues to be the field's norm in terms of formally training student affairs professionals (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2019). However, the expansion of UGSAC leads us to wonder if these norms might be shifting or changing. Moreover, despite the presence of UGSAC at approximately 15 institutions across the U.S., little is known about the influence of UGSAC on students who enroll.

While there is increasing attention paid to student affairs graduate preparation in the research, the literature on UGSAC is largely nonexistent aside from an article (McKenzie et al., 2017) and a dissertation (Nelson, 2020), both of which are limited to a singular undergraduate student affairs course. McKenzie et al. (2017) examined the impact of a singular "careers in student affairs" undergraduate course on students who successfully completed the course and found that students who completed the course reported that the content was a helpful entry point to the field of student affairs. Moreover, for those who eventually entered graduate coursework or pursued a career in student affairs, this course assisted in their socialization into the profession (McKenzie et al., 2017). Although this study provides an important foundation for further exploration of UGSAC, it only explored the impact of a singular course, and future research has yet to be published exploring UGSAC. Building upon McKenzie et al.'s (2017) research, Nelson (2020) focused on a singular introductory course on student affairs but sought to understand the course's influence on students' career development. Participants experienced growth in self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations in line with Lent et al.'s (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which promoted

more informed exploration of the student affairs career and associated decision-making processes to pursue the career (Nelson, 2020).

There is a great breadth of research opportunities around UGSAC, including curriculum development and instructional considerations, the impact of UGSAC on students who do not intend to pursue a student affairs career, and the influence of UGSAC on students to promote early professional socialization in the field of student affairs. In this study, we were particularly interested in the ways in which participating in UGSAC influenced undergraduate engagement.

Undergraduate Student Engagement

According to Kuh et al. (2006), two components comprise the construct of student engagement in college. Student engagement "is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 31) in combination with the ways in which institutions provide and structure curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities that lead to intentional learning outcomes (Kuh, 2001). Kuh's widespread concept of student engagement allows both academic and co-curricular opportunities to serve important roles in student learning without giving more value to one type of activity over another. However, researchers have most frequently explored the influence of co-curricular engagement on academic outcomes, as opposed to the reverse; how does academic engagement promote co-curricular engagement?

There is a great wealth of extant scholarship clearly connecting student engagement to student success measures of persistence, completion, GPA, critical thinking, and career development (Astin, 1975, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Researchers have also sought to understand what types of co-curricular involvement opportunities most impact student success as well as what quantity and quality lead to optimal academic success finding a positive effect between depth of involvement and GPA specifically and a

lower effect on GPA with increased breadth of involvement (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018).

Student engagement in co-curricular involvement opportunities is also recognized as contributing to students' professional success. Skills frequently developed in co-curricular settings, such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving, have become increasingly recognized in careers, such as engineering (Volkwein et al., 2004). Specifically related to the field of student affairs, researchers have demonstrated how undergraduate co-curricular experiences have led students to pursue careers in student affairs. The influence of undergraduate leadership experiences and mentorship from student affairs professionals are known contributors to the motivation to pursue a career in student affairs (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Hunter, 1992; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006).

However, in both the examples of engineering and student affairs, student engagement is shown to promote academic and professional success, as opposed to recognizing ways in which academic engagement can lead to students intentionally deciding to engage in co-curricular experiences. This gap in the literature, particularly within the context of the emerging UGSAC, requires exploration to understand the influence of academic engagement within UGSAC on co-curricular involvement decisions.

Much of the research has focused on defending the importance of co-curricular engagement by making connections to academic achievement. While the positive impacts of co-curricular engagement have been shown, how the academic experience can influence co-curricular engagement has been less explored. One aspect of the academic experience, faculty/student interaction, has been explored to learn more about how students' connections with faculty members can influence overall student learning outcomes. For example, faculty/student interactions were found to support student growth in the intellectual and personal/social outcomes, as well as student satisfaction

with their collegiate experience (Endo & Harpel, 1982). This research focuses on a singular aspect of the academic experience and more research exploring how academic content, such as student affairs coursework at the undergraduate level, can influence engagement is needed to contribute to holistically engaging students from whichever entry point to their success is most effective; co-curricular to academic or academic to co-curricular.

Conceptual Framework

—The interconnectedness of student learning model presented in *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) provided the conceptual framework that informed this study. This model presents a framework of student learning that has three core components. First, the model centers on the student and their respective behavior, meaning-making mechanisms, and cognitive/emotional capacity. Second, the model posits that student learning is situated in three contexts: the academic context, the social context, and the institutional context. Finally, the model articulates three integrated outcomes: construction of knowledge, construction of meaning, and construction of self in society. Each of these components is mutually reinforcing and interact in complex and multifaceted ways. Moreover, the model promotes reflective action as critical to student learning.

Given the ways in which this model demonstrates the student learning process as both dynamic and reflective, we believe that this model serves as a useful conceptual framework to explore the influence of UGSAC on undergraduate students' engagement decisions. For example, when we consider the first component of the model around contexts, we understand UGSAC to have strong grounding in all three contexts. As formally delivered and credit-bearing coursework, there is a clear connection to the academic context. Because of the nature of the coursework, there is overlap in the social context, or put more specifically, the co-curricular context. That is, as students learn

about the nature and function of student affairs, this learning may be put into practice as a part of their engagement within student affairs (e.g., involvement in student organizations, engagement in student employment positions). The aforementioned connection between the academic context and the social (or co-curricular) context is positioned within the institutional context. In addition to the context component of the model, we understand the other components related to the student, and integrated outcomes also connect to the study and the study's participants in unique ways.

Methods

The study presented here is part of a larger study on the influence of UGSAC on undergraduate students. For the purpose of this portion of the study, we investigated the ways in which UGSAC influenced undergraduate campus engagement.

Data Collection

We relied on a basic qualitative research approach and associated methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) because we sought to understand how participants made sense of their UGSAC experience, how their participation in UGSAC influenced their experiences in the co-curricular setting, and finally what those experiences meant in relation to each other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants who met the following criteria:

- 1) Completed two or more undergraduate student affairs courses at a four-year institution in the U.S.
- 2) Matriculated into or graduated from a master's degree program in student affairs
- 3) If graduated from their master's degree program in student affairs, participants must have been within three years of completion.

Participants were recruited from email out-

reach to institutions with known UGSAC, emails to a listserv of student affairs graduate preparation program faculty (CSP-Talk), posts on the Future Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page, and posts on the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page. From that outreach, we received seven interested participants, of which six completed the entire data collection process.

As a qualitative study, one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection for the study. Two interviews, conducted and recorded using a video-conferencing platform, were completed with six of the seven participants. One participant only engaged in one interview and did not respond to participate in the second interview. Utilizing a semi-structured protocol, the first interview included 18 questions geared toward exploring participants' experiences with UGSAC and impacts on their exposure and commitment to the field of student affairs. The interview protocol was guided by the socialization framework (Weidman et al., 2001; Weidman, 2006) with questions categorized by anticipatory stage, formal stage, informal stage, and personal stage, as well as questions focused on cognitive, cohesion, and control commitment. Interview questions for the second interviews were developed from initial analysis of data from the themes that emerged during the first interviews.

Participants

The recruitment process yielded the participation of seven new professionals who completed two or more undergraduate courses in student affairs and were in or recently completed their master's degree in student affairs. Table 1 provides detailed demographic data of the participants. Five participants identified as women, and two identified as men. Two participants identified as Latinx, and the remaining five identified as white. Among the seven participants, they represented four different undergraduate institutions offering UGSAC in various geographical regions of the U.S., including the Southeast, Great Lakes, Midwest, and Moun-

tain West. Across the participants, they attended six different institutions for their master's degree representing the same geographic locations as the undergraduate institutions. The participants each completed UGSAC as part of an undergraduate minor, and their majors were focused in the social science areas of communications, psychology, and human development. Confidentiality of participants' identities was maintained by removing identifiable content from data and ensuring institutions and participant names were masked.

Data Analysis

Following the transcription of the first interviews, the three-person research team employed an inductive approach to data analysis, which included a multi-step process (Creswell, 2002). Independently, after each reading the first interview transcripts, we employed process coding (Saldaña, 2016) to understand the experiences of participants in UGSAC. From the codes identified, we individually developed initial themes and came to a consensus on the most salient themes that represented participants' experiences related to the influence of UGSAC on their undergraduate involvement experiences. The themes from the analysis of the first interviews provided the foundation of the second interview semi-structured protocol. The second interview data provided further context to the experiences of participants and provided the opportunity to explore the initial themes in more depth. The individual coding and theme development process we undertook with the first interview data was repeated with the second interview data resulting in the final development of three main themes.

Trustworthiness

We employed member checking by confirming initial themes with participants in the second interview and then also explored the themes in further depth during the second interview. Internal validity was supported throughout the findings with the inclusion of participants' quotes.

It is also necessary for consumers of this research to understand our positionality. We are both white faculty members in a student affairs program that offers UGSAC. One is a mid-career, cisgender, heterosexual woman who has been involved with the initial design and implementation of the UGSAC, and the other is an early career, cisgender, gay man, who began teaching UGSAC at their institution three years after the courses' inception. As co-researchers, we engaged in reflection that attended to our dominant and marginalized identities and the ways in which these may have shown up throughout the research process. Professionally, we have both taught in and contributed to revisions to the UGSAC on our campus. These professional experiences, as well as the recent expansion of UGSAC across the country, led us to conduct this exploration.

Limitations

We have identified three limitations to this study and its findings. First, all participants ultimately decided to pursue student affairs graduate coursework, and thus, the sample represents UGSAC students who found value and meaning in their courses as they were able to connect them to their undergraduate involvement experiences. Thus, the findings do not represent the voices of UGSAC students for whom their coursework did not influence their involvement choices or those who found it to have a negative influence. Second, while four of the approximately 15 institutions offering UGSAC are represented by the study participants, still two-thirds of the campuses are not. Learning more about students from additional institutional contexts may have provided a fuller picture of this phenomenon. Third, although our recruitment efforts were robust and sought to secure a racially and ethnically diverse pool of participants, the demographic diversity of our final participant sample was limited. Thus, the findings are limited to the perspectives and experiences shared by these particular participants. A more

racially and ethnically diverse sample may have shaped the findings in different ways.

Findings

As a result of our data analysis, we identified three primary themes that helped us answer our research question. First, the participants of the study described being able to immediately apply their learning to decisions about their involvement and engagement on campus. Second, the participants of the study explained that UGSAC was useful in refining their leadership abilities, allowing them to intentionally apply their learning from UGSAC into practice. Finally, the participants of the study described how UGSAC helped them better understand themselves and make meaning of their identities and lived experiences.

Decisions about Involvement and Engagement

Several participants shared how learning about student development theory, and the overarching outcomes of higher education contributed to their decision to become involved in high impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008) and take responsibility for their learning experiences in college. Through courses such as student development theory, participants applied developmental theory to themselves and were able to see the developmental goals and seek out opportunities for growth in the college environment. Beyond decisions to promote their own learning and development, UGSAC contributed to participants' value of institutional processes and efforts to improve the student experience. Specifically, participants viewed the co-curricular efforts positively and sought to participate because they trusted that there was deeper meaning to each opportunity (e.g., a pizza party in a residence hall was not about the pizza, but about community development and encouraging interaction with diverse individuals).

Lindsey shared how learning about student development theory and the overarching outcomes

of higher education contributed to her decision to become involved in high impact practices and take responsibility for her learning experience.

Yeah, there's something so weird about learning about student development while you're an undergrad student. The meta-analysis was uncanny. I really was frustrated for a long time with how much was going on that influenced my day-to-day life and development, and everything about me that I had no idea was happening to me. And once I got past the frustration, I really wanted to just like tell everyone about it, and then I started feeling a little bit more like I could take control over my own development. I'm reflecting on what I haven't done, and you know as soon as I started learning about high-impact practices, it was like - which ones have I done and which ones have I yet to do? It was almost like a bucket list, which feels weird. So, I started feeling empowered to take control of the rest of my development. I was just more aware of what was happening.

Katie had a similar experience as she began to apply developmental theory to herself in the context of her higher education experience. Through her knowledge of theory, Katie was able to see the developmental goals of students like her and seek out opportunities for growth.

It helped me identify myself, so learning about student development theories helped me understand where I was at and a lot of those transitions or where I fell in the cycle... It helped me identify where I was at especially leading up to graduation and helped me see where I was heading, what direction I was going in.

Both Lindsey and Katie were able to apply their learning about development and intentional learning practices to better inform how to engage on campus.

Some decisions about involvement identified by participants were based on their learning about institutional needs and how they can contribute to achieving them. A positive outcome of UGSAC for institutions broadly was participants' value of

institutional processes and efforts to improve the student experience, such as assessment work. Alejandro noted,

My student affairs courses helped me be more involved in student activities or campus activities. You know, surveys as simple as that, because I knew that that was meaningful and I knew that they were being done for a reason, and so the undergraduate coursework showed me how I can really get into the college life as a student who really understands the value of that. Then, I started to break it down like, hey there's really learning outcomes for this event that you're going to benefit from... it really helped me get more into the student life of a college student and see different aspects of it, so in that sense, that's how it helped me become more of a college student. I participated way more and understood why that was happening.

Learning about the scope and purpose of involvement opportunities, particularly co-curricular ones, benefitted students individually as they more strategically focused on their development, but also the institution with enhanced engagement and participation in improving experiences for other students as well.

Applying Theory to Practice in Campus Leadership Roles

Being able to apply content from courses as they were learning it contributed to participants integrating theory to practice and seeing the value of their academic learning in higher education settings. Learning about student development and the purpose of higher education in the setting of higher education is a prime example of experiential learning and the interconnectedness of student learning model (2014). Because of participants' high levels of involvement and peer leadership positions, each participant discussed how their student affairs coursework contributed to being a more effective student leader. The participants shared how learning about particular concepts informed their approach to working with

peers as a student leader. Specifically, the participants shared experiences of how their UGSAC provided them with the skills and tools to ask better questions of their peers and enhance empathy for understanding others' experiences in college. The participants also gained more in-depth, behind the scenes knowledge of various resources on campus and were able to use that information to provide referrals and support to their peers.

As Nick shared,

The biggest thing that it did was I started practicing more of the learning partnerships model. I could look back from a goal that we have worked on and polished and I really took that to heart. And servant leadership and transformative leadership, really all those kinds of three constructs kind of stuck with me and that's how I operate when I dealt with students that I worked with... I think it broadened how we had conversations and made us better students overall, and we had better conversations, as a group we had better conversations with our other classmates.

Fabiola acknowledged how her student affairs coursework enhanced her empathy for students and thus her ability to better serve as a resource and support when needed.

I think that it gave me a bit more patience, I guess, because I understood that there was more than what meets the eye of what students are going through, especially when I was working orientations and I was helping students register for classes. It was more about trying to understand what they needed and what was going on, but also supporting them. Also, it took me out of me telling them - you should sign up for this course. It was me brainstorming with them on what they think that they should do and what's going to be beneficial for them. So, I really think that I was able to put more emphasis on the student and having them make their own decisions.

Similar to Fabiola's experience, Alejandro identified how he could better support his peers as

an undergraduate student, albeit at a foundational level.

It really helped me with peers... it was apparent on how I could help them and not help them. To know that I can't help you [student], but I can still support you in whatever is going on, really helped me to really take a step back and assess the situation and to start implementing some of those theories and helping skills and be like 'Hey what part of the vectors are you [student] in right now?' It helped with my communication with my peers, my interaction with them in different settings within terms of support... it was a start for me where I was able to implement some of that knowledge and those skills with my peers.

Katie's ability to assist students in her student employment position included applying her helping skills as well as her enhanced knowledge of campus developed through UGSAC.

So, I was a student lead in academic advising office and I used the knowledge gained from the courses when supporting the other undergraduate students, my peers. But I was supervising them, so the knowledge that I had gained on how to support students or how to engage with students or just understanding where they're at in their development helped me communicate with them. Especially when a student's coming in and they're coming into their shift and they're stressed out because they didn't pass their biology class and they think they're not going to make it into the nursing program, I can take away pieces of how to support them. Or even students who came into the academic advising office as a regular student, not someone that works there, and helping them try to navigate the campus when they're trying to change their major, but don't know how... or need help finding this, or having to drop a class because their car broke down. It's like 'Okay, well, here are your resources,' so I knew how to navigate the campus a little bit more to help support students.

UGSAC provided participants with addition-

al training to better fulfill their student leadership and employment positions on campus. Being able to apply their student affairs coursework learnings to their work with students not only benefited their peers, but also contributed to their ability to integrate theoretical concepts into practical experience, thus enhancing their learning.

Improved Understanding of Identities as a College Student

Developing an understanding of self is a major developmental goal in higher education, with a main aspect being students understanding their social identities (Patton et al., 2016). The diversity and inclusion coursework as part of their UGSAC provided opportunities for participants to explore their social identities and understand how their individual college experiences were influenced by those identities. Participants understood their college experiences differently once learning how their experiences were not just their own, but often shared among college students from similar social identities. This learning allowed them to redefine their experience and address some of the structures and challenges they faced.

Fabiola's experience learning about her first-generation college student identity and racial and ethnic background provided explanation to her undergraduate college experiences.

That was like an aha once I applied what I had learned to myself... an aha moment but then also when we started learning a little bit more about identities and I'm a first-generation college student and half Hispanic, half Native American, and just realizing that my campus is a predominantly White institution. I didn't realize that at the time, but as we discussed more about identities and how that can impact you on campus, I was able to kind of internalize that more and understand maybe why sometimes I didn't feel included on campus or in spaces, or even, like, in academics.

Fabiola reflected upon her transition to higher education and her reason for not pursuing a de-

gree at her initial institution. She was able to analyze how her identity as a first-generation college student influenced her transition.

I understood why I had such a rough transition at the beginning of the year. I was really able to conceptualize that my lack of involvement, my lack of sense of belonging really were huge components of me not feeling so great during that first year. Again, also reflecting on my own identities and being a first-generation college student, I didn't have help in doing what I was doing and I didn't know what I was doing, because you know first generation students don't have that family support. Yes, [they were] emotionally supportive, but they couldn't provide necessarily the academic support.

Lindsey was able to analyze the history of women in higher education and how her college experiences as a woman were impacted by her identity as a woman.

I think identity plays a role. I started thinking more and more about my social identities too. Especially when we started thinking about the history of education. You know, women alone have only recently started getting college degrees as much as they do... learning about the history really opened my eyes a little bit more.

As participants developed knowledge about the impact of their identities through their UGSAC, they understood their college experience as less about them individually and more about the commonalities in the higher education experiences of other members in their collective identity groups. Making the connections between their identities and harmful structural aspects of higher education, participants began to understand their experiences and advocate for themselves differently.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate that our participants found their engagement in

UGSAC to be both useful and meaningful to their overall learning experience both in and out of the classroom. The UGSAC coursework influenced the way they showed up within their co-curricular engagement. Their involvement in student organizations was more intentional, their engagement with peers and co-workers was more empathetic and compassionate, and their understandings of their own identities, particularly for those with marginalized identities, was enhanced in positive ways. Participants' explanations of having a more informed understanding of both what individual students might be going through in college as well as how higher education functions positioned them to take advantage of new opportunities and make meaning of their experiences in new ways. The previous literature, specifically about UGSAC (McKenzie et al., 2017; Nelson, 2020), focused on its influence on students' continued interest in and pursuit of a student affairs career. While UGSAC contributes in a valuable way to developing future professionals earlier than during graduate school, the influence during the undergraduate experience for students who ultimately decide to pursue another career field remains useful to providing quality peer mentorship through student leadership and employment positions on campus.

Utilizing the interconnectedness of student learning model as our conceptual framework helped to illustrate the substantive nature of UGSAC and its impact on student engagement. The participants' behaviors, meaning-making mechanisms, and cognitive/emotional capacity were highlighted throughout the findings, demonstrating personal growth as a result of UGSAC. The academic context of UGSAC naturally intersected with the social context of the participants' involvement on their respective campuses. It was clear that the content from UGSAC helped to shape the ways that our participants engaged on campus, including with their peers. UGSAC prompted these students to construct new knowledge about how college students develop and how institutions function, make meaning of this new knowledge by

ultimately applying it to their co-curricular interactions, and develop a more meaningful sense of self in the context of their role on a college campus.

Engagement in higher education is often discussed in two different areas of campus: academic engagement and co-curricular engagement. The findings from this study demonstrate how academic engagement can influence co-curricular engagement despite the majority of literature focusing on student engagement that highlight the connection between co-curricular engagement and academic success. Co-curricular engagement can encourage students to do better academically as they develop their purpose and reason for being in college (Cooper et al., 1994; Smith & Griffin, 1993). The academic setting is a prime opportunity to promote co-curricular engagement. First-year experience seminar courses frequently provide a buffet approach to encourage engagement by introducing students to opportunities (Freer, 2016). However, when academics are used to promote specific types of involvement, the engagement choices of students are more closely connected to their career and academic interests, as was demonstrated by participants' application of their UGSAC course learnings in the co-curricular settings of involvement and student employment.

Teaching undergraduate students about higher education and student development within the higher education environment is a prime example of the interconnectedness of student learning model (2014). Notably, the participants are UGSAC students who ultimately pursued a career in student affairs, so it is unclear if the influence of UGSAC is universal or specific to students who recognize the value of how their college experience is a laboratory for continued learning related to their career goals. Thus, we wonder if these types of outcomes would be shared by students who did not choose to pursue a career in student affairs.

Implications for Research and Practice

As a new area of exploration, there are several implications for research and practice generated

by this study. Considering the three findings about how UGSAC courses influenced participants' involvement choices, leadership and peer mentoring, and identity exploration, faculty teaching these courses should intentionally incorporate opportunities for students to reflect on how their course learnings are influencing their collegiate experience. Utilizing this study's findings to guide the reflections can further provide influence of UGSAC on student involvement and development. Additionally, faculty should partner with student affairs professionals on the campus to identify opportunities for students to apply their UGSAC learning, instead of relying on students to make the connections on their own. By including a practical component into all courses will ensure students are able to apply their learning, which makes these experiences accessible to all students regardless of if they have additional time outside of their academic coursework to be engaged in campus involvement opportunities.

With respect to student affairs practice, this study demonstrated the utility of UGSAC as a positive influence on undergraduate student engagement. Of course, not every university will provide formal UGSAC. However, student affairs practitioners might imagine creative ways to infuse student affairs curricula into existing programs. For example, first-year experience courses might include lessons on student development theory, an introduction to involvement theory and intended learning outcomes for college graduates, and high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008). These kinds of approaches, even though not directly tied to formal UGSAC, may also positively influence undergraduate students' engagement. Making the goals of educational interventions more transparent to all students could contribute to better decision-making related to their academic and co-curricular engagement while in college.

More research is needed to understand the scope of UGSAC on college campuses in the U.S. Given the influence of UGSAC on participants' collegiate involvement experiences; further research

is needed to explore the efficacy of teaching similar content to the general population of undergraduate students. Based on the impact that UGSAC content had on participants who had a pre-existing interest in student affairs, understanding how implementing practices such as teaching first-year students about student development theory could influence their decisions about their college experience could contribute to enhancing student learning, engagement, and satisfaction.

As was the experience for participants in this study, future research should consider how UGSAC informs their student affairs graduate preparation experiences as well as their entry into the field. Learning more about the transition of students who completed UGSAC into student affairs graduate preparation programs, as well as their socialization process into their roles in student affairs, is worthy exploration.

Conclusion

—As faculty consider the implementation of UGSAC on their campuses, the findings of this study can contribute to intentional design of coursework. Using this knowledge that enhanced student engagement and theory to practice reflection as outcomes of UGSAC not only benefit the students in the courses, but also their leadership sites and peers as they are better prepared to meet challenges they encounter. As a new approach to student affairs preparation, continued research about UGSAC is clearly needed, particularly to understand more about how the UGSAC content can enhance student engagement more broadly.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Name | Gender | Race/ Ethnicity | Undergraduate Graduation Year | Graduate School Graduation Year | Went Directly to Graduate School from Undergraduate Degree | First Generation Student | Traditional Student (ages 18-24 during undergrad) | Student Employee | Same University for Undergraduate and Graduate Degree |
|-------------|---------------|---|--|--|---|---|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Katie | Woman | White | 2019 | 2021 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Alejandro | Man | LatinX | 2018 | 2020 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Fabiola | Woman | Other (American Indian & LatinX) | 2018 | 2021 | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Amber | Woman | White | 2018 | 2021 | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Jeanne | Woman | White | 2018 | 2020 | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Lindsey | Woman | White | 2019 | 2021 | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Nick | Man | White | 2017 | 2020 | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |