PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE PREPARATION

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Abstract

This study explores how students' professional learning is distributed across and mediated by multiple learning environments during student affairs graduate preparation. Utilizing activity system analysis and qualitative case study, the study reports on the experiences of four second-year Master's students at a Midwest preparation program. Findings demonstrate how fieldwork experiences shape what graduate students deem as essential or useful knowledge for their practice and, consequently, the value they place on coursework experiences. Participants often rejected formal knowledge when it did not offer clear and immediate solutions to their daily problems. This study raises implications for individuals working with graduate students regarding their professional development, especially faculty members and fieldwork supervisors.

Student affairs work involves multiple layers of complexity. Student affairs practitioners "have broad roles, both conceptually and practically" (ACPA & NASPA, 2004, p. 24) and leverage a variety of cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and practical skills in their daily practice. Student affairs practitioners are required to utilize highly specialized knowledge about postsecondary institutions and students. Student affairs practitioners must also possess a sense of agency in pursuing their work and establishing collaborative partnerships, multicultural sensitivity in interacting with student and staff populations, and leadership skills for navigating change and resolving conflict. Student affairs practitioners, then, are expected to know and do much in effectively serving students.

To train practitioners for the complexities and realities of their work, the profession has increasingly relied on Master's-level preparation programs. These programs serve as the first step in introducing new practitioners to the profession (Creamer et al., 2001), a space for developing professional identity (Liddell et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), and the foundation for helping practitioners succeed in future work (Winston & Creamer, 1997). Scholars have raised concerns about the effectiveness of preparation programs. New student affairs practitioners often lack the administrative skills their employers prioritize (Ardoin et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2016; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004). These concerns highlight the perceived separation between what students do in their field experiences and what they learn through their program's formal curriculum (Ardoin et al., 2019; Kuk et al., 2007). Indeed, scholarship on graduate preparation often focuses on student experiences in or reflections on either fieldwork or coursework with less attention to the interplay and mediations between these two learning environments.

The purpose of this study is to explore how students enrolled in Master's-level student affairs preparation programs in the United States learn to do student affairs work. Recognizing the need for holistic perspective on where and how learning occurs during graduate training, I leverage a sociocultural learning approach in asking: How is students' professional learning distributed across and mediated by multiple learning environments?

Structures of Student Affairs Graduate Preparation

Graduate preparation programs may differ in their curricular emphasis, the number of required credit hours, and their specific expectations for field experiences. In general, however, preparation programs generally require some combination of formal academic coursework and supervised practice through field experiences and seek to make connections between the two (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2020).

Coursework

Scholarship on formal coursework focuses on curricular content and the various professional values it communicates. Scholars have explored graduate courses as sites to teach about and communicate collaborative leadership (Rogers, 1992), values education (Young & Elfrink, 1991), spirituality (Rogers & Love, 2007), diversity (Flowers, 2003; Gaston Gayles & Kelley, 2007), and anti-deficit perspectives (Perez II et al., 2017). Shelton and Yao (2019) found program curricula often lacked focus on the needs of and services for international students. Harris (2020) also noted how faculty members teaching student development theory courses were socialized to and grappled with the centrality of particular texts and theories as "foundational" to the profession.

Scholars exploring how coursework and classroom experiences prepare new practitioners for the profession have identified strengths and limitations. New professionals have expressed formal coursework having little connection to the demands of their work (Renn & Jessup-An-

ger, 2008). Recent program graduates report out-of-class experiences playing a greater role in shaping their professional identity than in-class experiences (Liddell et al., 2014). However, in-class experiences help students appreciate the process of self-evaluation, model ethical practice, and connect with professional associations. Linder et al. (2015) highlighted faculty members could support and validate graduate students of color but frequently failed to fully implement inclusive pedagogy. Shelton and Yao (2019) noted the lack of attention to international students in the formal curriculum left new practitioners disadvantaged to work in a globalized and internationalized profession. In sum, coursework is an important but insufficient venue for preparing new practitioners to work in student affairs.

Fieldwork

Field experience takes the form of graduate assistantships, internships, and practica (CAS, 2020). Scholarship highlights the importance of fieldwork in preparing new practitioners for the profession. Liddell et al. (2014) found fieldwork experiences helped students understand professional expectations, expand their networks, and navigate institutional politics. Similarly, Young (2019) found fieldwork experiences informed students' perception of leadership and application of theory to practice. As Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) noted, "nearly all participants wrote about how assistantships, practicum placements, and internships were essential components in their preparation for full-time positions" (p. 329). This scholarship supports the assumption fieldwork provides invaluable exposure to experiential learning and the day-to-day demands of student affairs work.

A smaller yet growing body of scholarship complicates understanding of how fieldwork experiences contribute to graduate students' socialization and development. Perez (2021) noted how socialization processes in fieldwork communicate and reinforce ideal worker norms, which in turn prompts students to engage in self-sacrifice and overwork. During fieldwork experiences, students may also be exposed to secondary traumatic stress (Lynch & Glass, 2020). Although fieldwork experiences may be powerful sites of professional learning, they may also expose emerging practitioners to maladaptive professional norms, expectations, and habits.

Student Experiences in Graduate Preparation

In addition to exploring aspects of coursework and fieldwork, scholars have explored other student experiences within graduate preparation programs. As Perez (2016) explained, students regularly encounter unfamiliar or challenging experiences. Their unique sensemaking about these experiences, however, relies on students' capacity for internal meaning-making. Students develop greater capacity for internal meaning-making when fieldwork supervisors and faculty members nurtured and supported their internal voice (Perez, 2017). Scholarship on graduate students of color has explored how race and racism shape their preparation for the profession as they encounter microaggressions and wrestle with tensions between the espoused and enacted values of their programs and the profession writ large (Harris & Linder, 2018; Kelley & Gaston Gayles, 2010; Linder & Winston Simmons, 2016). This literature highlights the importance of considering student affairs graduate students' experiences and outcomes within their unique sociocultural contexts.

Graduate Preparation as Activity System(s)

This study is grounded in a conceptual model (see Figure 1; Hunter, 2022) framing the structures of student affairs graduate preparation through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), a sociocultural perspective on learning. CHAT conceptualizes learning as the process by which individuals transform themselves and their

social environments through ongoing participation in goal-directed activities (Engeström, 1987). Central to CHAT is the activity systems model, a theoretical tool for mapping the dimensions of a particular learning environment. Within this model *subjects* (individual learners) pursue *objects* (goals) by accessing, using, and adapting the social and material *tools* available to them within a learning environment. The activity systems model also highlights the *community* (others participating in the environment), *rules* (formal and informal expectations for how the environment will operate), and *division of labor* (how tasks are shared amongst the community) present within a specific learning environment. These six dimensions of a learning environment mutually interact with one another, mediating changes within the learning environment. Third-generation CHAT scholars (e.g., Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) have also championed attention to joint activity, examining how interactions across and amongst the dimensions of multiple learning environments spurs transformation and learning.

Extending this focus on joint activity to the dual-model of student affairs graduate preparation programs, the present study frames graduate preparation as students' participation in two primary learning environments: (a) classroom environments students engage in as part of the formal curriculum, or the *coursework activity system*; and (b) supervised practice environments students engage in as part of field experience requirements, or the *fieldwork activity system* (Hunter, 2022). Individual graduate students serve as the *subjects*, and the goals they pursue, such as honing skills or developing knowledge, serve as the *objects*. Each environment provides unique *tools* students can utilize, such as the readings students complete or software embedded in their fieldwork offices. Each environment provides a *community* of others, such as instructors, supervisors, and peers. Each environment is governed by formal and informal *rules*. An instructor may set formal course policies for evaluating assignments. A su-

pervisor may communicate unspoken expectations about how a supervisee should respond to work requests outside of business hours. Within each environment, actors engage in *division of labor* for requisite tasks. A supervisor may require a supervisee to complete particular responsibilities as part of their job description. An instructor may draft discussion questions about the day's topic but then encourage students to actively participate in directing the conversation.

Methodology and Methods

This study utilized case study (Yin, 2014) and activity system analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) to explore how students' professional learning is distributed across and mediated by multiple learning environment during their graduate training. Activity system analysis offers practical guidance for designing a study exploring student learning through a sociocultural learning perspective (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). In activity system analysis, the researcher identifies a relevant, bounded activity system and maps that system using the constructs involved in the activity systems model—subjects, tools, rules, community, division of labor, and objects. Activity system analysis is especially compatible with and often coupled with a qualitative case study approach because of their complementary focus on exploring phenomenon with bounded social contexts (Yin, 2014).

The context for this study is the Student Affairs Preparation (SAP) program at Brady University (both pseudonyms), a Master's-level student affairs preparation program in the Midwest United States. This particular program was selected as an illustrative case study site (Yin, 2014) because it (a) focuses specifically on training student affairs practitioners; (b) enrolls most students full-time; (c) offers a majority of its coursework in-person; (d) requires, in keeping with CAS (2020) recommendations, 300 hours of supervised fieldwork; (e) has an established history of training individuals for student affairs work; and (f) has multiple

faculty members actively engaged in the profession through recent publications in student affairs journals and participation in professional associations.

Because student activity serves as the unit of analysis in this study, Master's-level students enrolled in SAP served as the primary participants and sources of data. In order to participate in the study, students were required to be: (a) in the second year of the SAP Master's program, (b) enrolled in the program full-time, and (c) employed as a graduate assistant at Brady University. Although some members of the second-year cohort worked graduated assistantships at nearby institutions, I chose to focus on students who completed both coursework and fieldwork at Brady University to bound the case (Yin, 2014) within a more specific context. The 19 students who met eligibility requirements were invited to participate via a recruitment email shared twice by the program director at the beginning of the academic year. Four students (pseudonyms used) accepted the invitation: Jake, Ann, Dexter, and Jane. I also encouraged participants to share information about the study with eligible peers, but this strategy did not yield additional participants. As revealed during data collection and discussed further in the results section, this particular SAP program cohort of students had experienced significant interpersonal conflict, especially in classes with one another. These tensions may have disincentivized students from participating in a study that asked them to further engage with and reflect on those experiences.

Jake worked in residence life and entered the SAP program directly from his undergraduate studies. Ann worked in student conduct and had worked in an entry-level student affairs role before returning to graduate school. Dexter worked in career services and had worked full-time outside of student affairs for several years before returning to graduate school. Jane also worked in career services and entered the SAP program directly from her undergraduate studies. Each student partici-

pated in two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews over the course of their second year in the SAP program. After each interview, participants were able to review and edit their transcripts to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Merriam, 1998). The first interview, in October, focused on exploring dimensions of participants' coursework and fieldwork experiences and how those experiences contributed to perceived learning in development. After this first interview, I conducted preliminary coding and mapping of each participant's activity systems. The second interview, in March, focused on sharing the emerging maps with participants so they could respond and clarify. Participants also had an opportunity to share new experiences and insights that occurred since the previous interview. Participants received a $20 gift card after their second interview.

Several other data sources helped to inform rich understanding of the case (Yin, 2014). First, I contacted all SAP faculty for a one-on-one, semi-structured interview. The program director and two additional faculty members accepted my invitation. Each interview addressed faculty members' perception of their teaching, courses, and student experiences. The program director's interview also included more overarching questions about SAP, including program history, goals, and curriculum. Second, I collected various written documents. The program director provided a program overview and curriculum map. Faculty members provided sample syllabi of recent Master's courses. In addition to the required interviews, students had the option to submit written work, such as reflection papers, they had completed for courses. Three participants (Jake, Dexter, and Jane) submitted examples of written work.

Data analysis in qualitative case study and activity systems analysis is a "process that leads to a thick description of participants, their activities, and the activity setting[s]" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 71). Activity system analysis can leverage diverse qualitative analysis strategies, including utilizing *a priori* frameworks and engaging

in more inductive constant-comparative analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). After collecting data from the aforementioned sources, I began to code data using *a priori* CHAT-oriented constructs (i.e., the activity system elements). In developing my understanding of each construct, I used a memo-writing process in which I identified the construct, presented the raw data connected to the construct, and describe my current thinking and rationale behind the construct. This memo-writing process helped me develop consistent and discrete understandings of concepts (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). As noted earlier, I did preliminary analysis between participants' first and second interviews. Thus, my design allowed for an iterative process of collecting and analyzing data. Throughout the interwoven processes of data collection and analysis, I compared pieces of raw data against the emerging concepts to elaborate and refine my *a priori* and conceptual codes (Merriam, 1998). Later coding completed after the second interview used theoretically informed questions to enrich the coding process (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). For example, while preliminary analysis illuminated tools participants used throughout graduate training, later coding focused on the ways in which tools were accessed, used, and adapted. Doing so supported me in developing a saturated description of relevant activity systems, one that accounts for all constructs within the systems.

This study utilized several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry. First, the two-phase interview protocol with students allowed me to engage in follow-up conversations in which I asked additional questions and sought further clarification as I developed the interpretive commentary (Johnson, 2002). Second, interviewees engaged in member checking of their transcripts and, for student participants, emerging activity systems maps in order to provide ongoing feedback on the analysis (Merriam, 1998). Third, data triangulation across student interviews, faculty interviews, and document analysis was used to build and confirm findings (Merriam, 1998).

These strategies allowed me to articulate a rich description of the case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) whose findings may be transferred into other graduate preparation contexts.

Results

Each participant serves as the subject of their joint learning environments (Engeström, 1987). This section explores the remaining elements of the activity system model—objects, tools, community, division of labor, and rules—in relation to the four participants' experiences in graduate preparation.

Objects

Every participant noted their primary objective during graduate preparation was to keep their student affairs careers moving in the direction they wanted. They described this direction in terms of securing post-graduation employment in a particular geographic region, in a particular functional area, and/or with a particular salary base. Participants noted they had been attracted to the SAP program specifically because of its strong track record of post-graduation employment and for ample opportunities to engage in fieldwork experiences related to their career goals. Indeed, the SAP program prominently featured these elements on its website, and the program coordinator noted the post-graduation employment track record as a point of pride for the program. For several participants, securing the job they wanted after graduation was a primary goal among several. For Jane, however, this was the only goal. Actions taken in her courses and her fieldwork single-mindedly served getting a satisfactory job. "I can't get a job if I don't graduate," she quipped.

The SAP program's mission and goals focused on developing reflective practitioners able to translate theory into practice in order to meet the demands of their work. Much of the formal language focused on students growing while in the program, and indeed, several participants echoed that growth narrative. Several participants de-

scribed wanting to expand their understanding of the profession, their role as professionals, and their skill set through their graduate preparation. Jake couched becoming a more skilled practitioner within the language of the ACPA and NASPA (2015) *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators*. For example, he discussed "becoming way more intentional" with the professional competencies and using them to assess his strengths and areas for growth as a practitioner. Ann described wanting to "become more aware of the field not only in a practitioner sense but in an academic sense too." After spending several years in an entry-level student affairs position, she saw graduate preparation as an opportunity to become "a better-rounded practitioner" by complementing her professional experience with new content knowledge.

Tools

When reflecting on the tools available to them in coursework, each participant discussed using "theory," a term for describing the totality of scholarly knowledge and content they encountered in their classes. Participants rarely referenced specific formal theories or concepts, instead describing broad categories of theories (e.g., student development, organizational, environmental) they found useful and interesting. Each participant gravitated to a category of theory they found immediately applicable to their fieldwork. Jake used organizational theory to understand and navigate the bureaucracy of the residence life office. Content from a law course helped Ann understand the rationale undergirding student conduct policies such as evidentiary standards and due process. Both Dexter and Jane expressed many of the theories they learned having little bearing on their work in career services but finding environmental theories useful in understanding office design. When participants could immediately see how theory informed practice, they appreciated and used it.

More often, however, participants discounted formal theories and stressed how they were not useful to current or future professional practice. Ann believed formal theories she encountered simply confirmed what she already knew:

> Sometimes I don't feel like I'm learning anything because if you are practicing, I don't know, as a just and ethical person, it just makes sense that this is how you would practice student affairs and how you'd understand it.

Similarly, Jane identified ways in which she utilized "simple" concepts, such as challenge and support, but otherwise did not have opportunities to apply student development theories to her interactions with students. Dexter did not believe future employers would care about his knowledge of theory: "When I'm applying for jobs I don't think I'm going to get questions on, 'So tell me about all these different theories that you learned. How do these apply to your job?' Like, no." Participants delegitimized the role of theory in student affairs practice when they perceived it disconnected, redundant, or sanitized compared to their lived realities.

When reflecting on the tools available in fieldwork to help reach their professional goals, participants readily identified practical experience, or as Dexter described "just doing the job," as most valuable. Experience provided participants with new skills they could take into future employment. As Jane noted, "I can critique a resume now. I can critique a cover letter....Those are skills I can take into the next job I didn't have before." Beyond developing technical skills, participants viewed particular fieldwork experiences as crucibles transforming how they understand the value of their work. Jake served as first responder to student crises during residence hall duty rotations. He reflected on his first time responding to a student with suicidal ideation:

> I think it was really important for me because it made me feel like the work I was doing was

good. I was able to recognize the impact of my work even if I wasn't being affirmed, and I was able to advocate for affirmation and validation more.

Participants gravitated to experience as tool because of new opportunities and challenges they perceived would prepare them for the realities of post-graduation work.

Community

Participants discussed faculty members as important actors in their coursework experience in determining curriculum and shaping classroom experiences. Dexter and Jane described pleasant but detached relationships with their faculty members. They interacted only within the context of assigned class times or when seeking input on specific assignments. Both noted faculty members were accessible, but the responsibility for building relationships rested solely with the student. As Jane put it, "You have to make the first move if you want [the faculty's] attention." Jake and Ann, in contrast, took initiative to build relationships with particular faculty members in and out of the classroom and gravitated to those with expertise related to their particular interests. For example, Jake had conversations with the faculty member who taught his higher education law course focused on applying legal principles in his residence life graduate assistantship. These more substantive relationships helped Jake and Ann make additional connections between course content and their work.

Participants emphasized their relationship with their direct supervisor(s) and how this relationship influenced their fieldwork experience. Reflections on their evolving relationship with supervisors were frequently raised in both student interviews and in periodic advising assignments completed throughout the SAP program. Dexter and Ann described their supervisors as mentors who provided professional development and sage advice. Dexter explained, "[My supervisor] has lit-

erally told me, 'I want to make sure that every experience that you get here is a new bullet point on your resume.'" Ann's co-supervisors were recent SAP program graduates. In addition to coaching her in student conduct work, they also advised Ann on elective courses to take, lent her textbooks, and dedicated time in meetings to ask about her classes. Jake and Jane described more transactional relationships with their direct supervisors. Jake equally shared responsibilities with his direct supervisor, each overseeing the operations of a residence hall in their area. Consequently, Jake felt left to his own devices unless a serious emergency occurred, a sentiment he shared in written reflection early in the program and that continued throughout his graduate experience. Jane's supervisor gave her specific tasks and prescribed how she should spend her 20 hours of work per week. However, Jane did not perceive her supervisor as someone she could seek out for additional advice about her professional development.

Participants discussed having close friendships with one or two peers. These peers operated as social outlets and helped participants authentically process graduate training. Largely, however, participants kept their peers at a distance. This shared sentiment reflected adversarial interpersonal dynamics that followed the participants' cohort throughout the program. Dexter explained, "The cohort before us deemed our cohort competitive, and people started living up to that name." Ann described how tension fomented especially in the diversity course required in their first year: "There was a lot of challenging. Not challenging in a supportive way. Just challenging in a 'shut you down' kind of way." The program coordinator identified differing degrees of comfort with diversity, equity, and inclusion issues as a source of tension for the cohort's community: "You get even more variation within a cohort with the level of experience and exposure and comfort [with diversity]....It becomes difficult to stay in conversation with people who think differently from you, who disagree with you." In their second year, peers had

resigned themselves to investing in their small circle of friends rather than a cohort-wide community. "We don't need to be best friends. We just need to be civil in classes together," Ann explained.

Division of Labor

Participants noted faculty members had positional authority granting them control over labor division in courses. Dexter observed, "Obviously they're not equal [to us]....they're the teacher. That's their job." Faculty members had license to determine course content, select materials, direct class sessions, and assign and evaluate assignments. However, participants noted how faculty members attempted to circumvent some of that authority by positioning themselves as "facilitators," learning partners responsible for creating opportunity for students to make meaning of material and connect it to practice. As several faculty members noted during their interviews and students also observed, they operationalized this teacher-as-facilitator role by utilizing strategies such as establishing group expectations, minimal lecturing, group discussions, and case studies. Because faculty members positioned themselves as facilitators, participants perceived their responsibility to be "active" classroom contributors. They needed to grasp concepts before class, contribute to conversations, and occasionally present material during class. Although faculty members and students fell into patterns of labor division, these arrangements were more fluid, co-constructed, and reliant on student agency.

In contrast, fieldwork supervisors provided more structure to participants' graduate assistantships. Participants referenced employment contracts that communicated specific tasks and projects they would complete. Jake's set of responsibilities, communicated through formal policy and informal departmental culture, positioned him as an equal professional. He was expected to complete the same work as an entry-level hall director. His contract stipulated working 30 hours per work, and Jake reported working more than

those hours during an average week. He also described splitting duties equally with his supervisor; Jake managed one building, and his supervisor managed another. The other participants experienced structured but more scaffolded responsibilities as graduate assistants. Supervisors gave them increasingly complex, larger scale tasks, especially between their first and second year. Ann heard residence hall-based conduct cases in her first year and university-wide conduct cases in her second year. Dexter and Jane were tasked with planning career fairs and programming in their second year. These three participants also observed their supervisors were careful to ensure they did not work beyond their 20 contracted hours per week.

Rules

Faculty members were the source of formal rules in coursework contexts because of their positional authority to determine course content and facilitate class sessions. Faculty members' established expectations carried messages about what they saw as essential knowledge for students to encounter during their graduate training. Beyond course content, Jake noted faculty members establishing expectations around challenge and support: "[Faculty members] want to create inclusive environments for education, create challenging environments, to avoid comfort and escaping difficult conversations." Dexter and Ann connected this notion of challenge and support in the classroom to faculty members' concern for training reflective practitioners who understand themselves and their work in new ways. Dexter observed, "They want students to think outside the box and really think about different perspectives." The interviewed faculty echoed this challenge and support philosophy, noting how their role was to broaden students', sometimes "naïve" as one instructor described, understanding of student affairs while also validating the unique experience and contributions they brought to an evolving profession. Informal peer dynamics, however, often subverted faculty expectations by creating

other rules for how students could interact with one another. Because students lacked trust with one another, they struggled to express themselves vulnerably. This peer climate somewhat impeded faculty members' expectations and efforts to engage students around challenging topics and to learn from others' perspectives. Participants, and even the course instructor, readily identified the program's diversity course as the site where peer mistrust was most prevalent and how interpersonal dynamics from that space spilled into other coursework spaces. How faculty members intended classroom spaces to operate and how they actually operated often did not align.

Participants noted their fieldwork sites contained numerous policies and regulations that served as formal rules and governed the daily operations of their work. Given the scope of their responsibilities as graduate assistants, participants felt they more or less needed to simply follow these rules to be successful in their roles. Jake, for example, explained the primacy of the residence life staff manual in guiding his work:

> There's a lot of structure with [the manual] and exactly what to do....Preparing for closing, everyone's just like, go to your hall director manual. Oh, you need help budgeting? Hall director manual. Oh, you need help with supervising students or job action? The hall director manual.

Other participants noted following similar existing office handbooks, policies, and procedures to determine what they should and should not do in their work. However, participants also encountered organizational politics that shaped their perception of how rational and equitable their offices, and the profession writ large, truly were. Ann noted what she saw as "shady politics" within Brady University's student affairs division influenced which professionals were respected and rewarded with promotions. "We tell our students that there are so many ways to advocate for yourself...

in these very transparent ways," she said, "In reality, we ourselves are navigating these sneaky pathways in order to gain power in our positions." Jake noted good work in his unit rarely received validation from central staff and instead was more likely to result in receiving more work. Although Career Services staff members espoused valuing graduate assistants' insights, Jane perceived practices in direct conflict with this message. "People [say] that they want feedback and that structural criticism, but they don't because then they get upset when they hear it," she explained. Formal rules in fieldwork contexts offered participants prescriptive approaches to doing their jobs. Informal rules emerging from deeper rooted cultural norms, however, created additional layers of ambiguity and complexity for participants to navigate.

Discussion

Findings suggest, although professional learning was distributed across both coursework and fieldwork activity systems, it was not distributed equally. Each of the participants described fieldwork experience as the primary location for their professional learning as they sought to become more skilled practitioners and position themselves for full-time careers. Participants deemed opportunities to practice skills through assistantship responsibilities especially important because they perceived these opportunities would be relevant to their work and securing a position after leaving the SAP program. These narratives about the centrality of fieldwork as a space for professional learning echo previous research on student affairs graduate preparation (Liddell et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 20008). Previous research on graduate training highlights concerns, often from seasoned professionals already in the field, about new practitioners lacking the administrative and interpersonal skills needed to do their work well (Cooper et al., 2016; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004). This study suggests current graduate students themselves may have

similar concerns. Participants wanted to spend their time and energies during graduate training on practicing the activities they envisioned doing in their post-graduation position.

Data from this study suggest an unequal distribution of professional learning across activity systems emerges from a fundamental relationship between the two systems. Fieldwork experiences mediate what students perceive as useful, meaningful, and relevant in their coursework. Participants craved to see immediate connections between what they learned in their courses and what they saw in their work. When those connections were not made, students deemed content knowledge less relevant to their practice. When participants could not see academic concepts manifested in their practice and could not envision how to translate specific theories into practice, they discounted that knowledge as irrelevant. Participants identified the academic content they could use in their current professional practice as the most salient and influential elements of their coursework. The realities and expectations of participants' fieldwork contexts, therefore, served as a filter for evaluating the utility of conceptual tools available to them in their coursework contexts.

This need for immediate application and relevance is unsurprising given the literature on principles of adult learning and motivation. When adult learners connect academic content with their lived experiences, they are able to situate that knowledge within existing schemas, cognitive structures that enable organized thought, and thereby develop richer and more complicated understanding of academic content (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The extent to which adult learners are able to see the relevance of content to their unique needs and circumstances increases the value learners place on the content (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and in turn is associated with positive achievement outcomes including goal attainment (Locke & Latham, 2002) and greater interest (Schiefele, 2009). Indeed, situating learning in the learner's experience is a hallmark of best practic-

es for supporting the learning and development of young adults (Ambrose et al., 2010; Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Results may also contribute to discussions about scholarship on translating theory to practice. For example, Reason and Kimball (2012) synthesized existing theory-to-practice models in offering a new model "built upon the foundation of formal theory" (p. 368). The model invites practitioners to consider the formal theories available to them and to reflect on how formal theory, filtered through an understanding of unique institutional context, shapes the more informal theories guiding their daily work. In this study,t few formal theories end up in new professionals' toolkits. Indeed, participants identified only one or two broad categories of theories, let alone specific formal theories, that informed and guided their work. Reason and Kimball (2012) noted the importance of formal theory stressed in guiding documents (e.g., CAS, 2020; ACPA & NASPA, 2015) that influence graduate preparation curricula. They reason appreciation for formal theory is deeply woven into students' graduate training experience. The SAP program faculty regularly espoused the value of professional competencies and formal theories and exposed students to a range of formal theories throughout the academic curriculum. Yet, because students did not immediately see relevance of formal theories and infrequently saw that appreciation mirrored in their fieldwork experiences, they often abandoned formal theory as a tool for professional practice. In Kimball's (2016) subsequent empirical work testing the Reason and Kimball model, student affairs practitioners had "complicated relationships with formal theories" (p. 296) and "utilize[d] formal theory if and when it [was] more useful to them" (p. 301) than their existing informal theories and mental models for working with students. The present study suggests the sentiments expressed by Kimball's (2016) participants emerge during graduate training and may become entrenched even before practitioners enter the full-time workforce.

Limitations

Findings from this study are tempered by the small sample size relative to the number of eligible participants from the SAP program's second-year cohort. Further, participants were full-time graduate students who held graduate assistantships and completed their degree requirements in person at a single graduate preparation program. Their graduate school experiences and the learning that emerged from those experiences are not representative of the full and diverse scope of student pathways in student affairs Master's programs. Students at programs situated in other institutional types or who participate through other modalities (e.g., online, hybrid) may possess starkly different perspective on the learning process and navigating multiple learning environments. Additionally, this study explored participants' perceptions of how they learned to do student affairs work and the elements that aided in their learning at a particular point in time. What students deem essential or nonessential to their professional preparation ultimately may not align to the challenges they encounter post-graduation.

Implications for Research and Practice

Participants in this study had entrenched perspective on the tools and contexts that contributed to their professional learning during graduate training and would prepare them for full-time work. However, the extent to which graduate training actually does influence students' professional practice in their first post-graduation position and moving forward is beyond the scope of this study. Students may discover the tools they found so useful and relevant ultimately inadequate to meet the demands of their new work. Students may also discover tools they previously deemed irrelevant to their practice much more applicable to their new work contexts and responsibilities. Longitudinal work with larger samples of participants on professional learning in student affairs graduate preparation could address not only the learning that occurs during graduate training but also how this learning influences and extends into individuals' professional career.

Sociocultural learning theories, including CHAT, acknowledge learning processes are situated within broader social and cultural forces, including systems of inequality (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). Although not the main focus of this study, systems of inequality shape how students perceive their learning environments. Further research should examine how students' social identities mediate their professional learning during graduate training and implications social identity has on dimensions of the activity system model. For example, future studies may examine how students' social identities inform how they interact with members of the community, the rules they perceive within a particular environment, and the tools they perceive they have access to and can use and adapt within a particular environment.

In designing graduate program curricula, faculty members should be cognizant of situating skill development opportunities within meaningful learning contexts. A traditional academic course may not be the most ideal site for students to develop the budgeting skills, for example, mid- and senior-level practitioners so desire. This study suggests how students potentially discount knowledge they see as purely theoretical and disconnected from the realities of their day-to-day professional work. As such, faculty members may need new avenues for engaging students in skill development that leverage the power of their fieldwork activity system. For example, faculty members could collaborate with assistantship supervisors to create required skill development experiences students complete during their graduate studies regardless of their specific office placement. Supervisors would ensure students get some kind of practical experience regarding any number of competency areas including budgeting, assessment and evaluation, or technology use. Faculty members could support students by creating opportunities for

them to reflect on these targeted fieldwork experiences and to make connections between these experiences and concepts from their existing coursework.

Fieldwork supervisors and colleagues shape how graduate students conceptualize the student affairs profession and effective student affairs practice. Fieldwork supervisors should consider how they serve as educators in preparing for new practitioners for the field and how the scope of students' fieldwork duties create opportunities for learning. Students in this study reported few opportunities to intentionally connect theory and practice in the course of their jobs. Supervisors focused more on exposing students to functional area-related administrative practices. As such, students gravitated toward accruing administrative experiences, which they felt would best prepare them for post-graduation work, and generally away from utilizing theoretical or scholarly knowledge. Fieldwork supervisors could reflect on their current supervision strategies to better ensure graduate students' responsibilities includes engagement in theoretical knowledge as a basis for and essential part of their professional practice.

Conclusion

In learning to do student affairs work, graduate students navigate the intersections of multiple learning environments, each unique in their social, material, and cultural realities and resources. Students' pathways within and between their unique learning environments, or activity systems, fundamentally shape what they believe about their nature of the work and what they understand as essential knowledge and skills. Individuals supporting graduate preparation programs should seek more holistic, more complex understanding of graduate students' learning environments and professional learning.

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Figure 1

Model of Student Affairs Graduate Preparation as Activity System(s)