

2019

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Molly M. (2019) "Better Together: A Collaborative Approach to Graduate Student Affairs," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 40, Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol40/iss1/18>

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Better Together: A Collaborative Approach to Graduate Student Affairs

Molly Williams

As the student affairs profession evolves to better support the needs of graduate students, a re-building of the relationship between academic and student affairs is vital for the success of graduate student support programs. Rates of mental illness are extremely high in the graduate population, and this trend is closely related to elevated attrition rates in recent years. Universities are attempting to support their graduate students through this crisis via separate faculty- and student affairs-led initiatives, which have been ineffective in addressing the needs of today's graduate population. Partnering with faculty members will result in holistic interventions that support students' needs both inside and outside of the classroom.

Content Warnings: suicide, suicidal ideation

Since the early days of the profession, student affairs has largely focused on the needs of undergraduate students. Given that the purpose of higher education has historically been to get students through a bachelor's degree program, this approach made sense for past generations of practitioners. However, a bachelor's degree is no longer a terminal goal for many students. Around 76% of college first-years anticipate continuing their education through a Master's, doctoral, or professional degree after graduation (Nelson, 2015a). The number of Americans holding a Master's degree or higher has increased by 43% since 2002, and 37% of those with a bachelor's degree have a Master's, doctoral, or professional degree as well (Baum & Steele, 2017; Nelson, 2015b). The population of graduate students is increasing, and demonstrates a high need for support. As student affairs evolves to better address the needs of graduate students, a re-building of the relationship between academic and student affairs is vital for the success of graduate student support programs.

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Challenges Faced by Graduate Students

Graduate education is facing a mental health crisis, with graduate students experiencing depression and anxiety at six times the rate of the general population (Evans, Bira, Beltran Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018). Students pursuing an advanced degree have a wide range of risk factors that may contribute to these astronomical rates of distress. Common stressors include role conflict (e.g., balancing being a student with holding a job on campus, with parenthood, or with a committed partnership), time constraint, financial pressures, and a perceived lack of support from personal networks as well as program administrators (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Difficulty adjusting to graduate culture is also common, particularly among first-year graduate students (Austin et al., 2009).

The astronomical incidence of mental disorders among graduate students is also linked to increased likelihood of suicidal ideation or suicide attempts in this population (Garcia-Williams, Moffitt, & Kaslow, 2014). The impetus to address this crisis for the sake of students' well-being is clear. However, this crisis also poses a threat to institutions and to the state of graduate education as a whole. In recent years, attrition rates in graduate programs have skyrocketed as more students are choosing to leave programs without completing their degrees (Hardré & Hackett, 2015). Hardré and Pan (2017) found that some of the most salient moments (both positive and negative) in students' graduate school experiences concerned whether or not their critical needs were met in moments of crisis. Graduate students who do not feel their needs are being met are likely to drop out of their program altogether, or, if they stay, to develop serious mental health disorders that jeopardize their well-being (Hardré & Pan, 2017).

Sources of Support for Graduate Students

Continually escalating rates of attrition & mental illness indicate that many students are experiencing a lack of support in graduate school. These trends underscore the need to evaluate the current state of institutional supports for graduate students. In this section, I review the separate roles of faculty and student affairs practitioners to contextualize the current approach to supporting graduate students.

Support from Faculty

Historically, graduate students have been helped primarily by their academic program or department (Bair, Grant Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004). Faculty members help students develop research skills, network within their field, and provide referrals to important resources on campus such as counseling services and student organizations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013).

When faculty-student relationships are working well, the outcomes can be quite favorable. Students who perceived a high level of support from their faculty advisors also reported a greater sense of belonging and a more positive academic self-concept (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). Such findings indicate that faculty support can, in some cases, guard against the attrition & mental distress that are so common in the graduate student population.

Unfortunately, researchers have identified a gap between the support faculty members are capable of providing and the support students actually experience in those relationships. Participants in Hardré and Pan's (2017) study identified perceived lack of faculty care as one of the most negative influences on their graduate experience. Their findings supported the results of a study by Oswald and Riddock (2007) wherein students reported that faculty members were insensitive to the stress they were experiencing. In a study of female political science students, Hesli, Fink, and Duffy (2003) found that lack of encouragement from faculty directly contributed to students' decision to leave their program. While faculty members remain an important part of graduate students' support networks, these relationships do not always work to their full potential, which can have serious effects on students' well-being.

Support from Student Affairs

Graduate and professional student support services have become an area of increasing interest for student affairs practitioners. NASPA and ACPA have each created communities within their professional organizations for higher education professionals working specifically with graduate and professional students (ACPA, n.d.; Bozeman, n.d.). Additionally, the most recent guidelines published by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) include significantly revised standards for graduate and professional student programs and services (Wells, 2015). Each of these initiatives reflects a growing recognition among higher education professionals of the need to dedicate specific services to students pursuing advanced degrees.

Where they are implemented, student affairs-led graduate support programs can improve students' sense of belonging, provide professional development, and enhance social interactions between students (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Nguyen & Larson, 2017). Unfortunately, these programs are not accessible to all graduate students. According to NASPA's most recent census, only 54% of universities have a specific office or team dedicated to graduate and professional student services (NASPA, 2014). Although it is encouraging that this does constitute a majority, 46% of universities serving graduate students are still not explicitly dedicating supports to this population's unique needs (NASPA, 2014). Additionally, of those universities which do have such an office, 68% report that graduate

student services are not located in the student affairs division (NASPA, 2014). Although higher education & student affairs professionals are beginning to understand the importance of providing services to graduate students, the profession has not successfully integrated graduate student services into practice nationwide.

The presence of resources also does not negate barriers to access. Complicated schedules and heavy academic and non-academic workloads can impede graduate students' ability to find time and energy to connect with resource centers on campus or make counseling appointments (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Additionally, graduate students report that they do not want their experience to include "more of the same" as their undergraduate careers, and may therefore be less likely to seek out resources from offices that are branded as primarily serving undergraduates (Hardré & Hackett, 2015). Since neither faculty nor student affairs resources have sufficiently addressed the staggering rates of attrition and mental health issues among graduate students, the following section will introduce a framework for a new student affairs-academic affairs partnership that will better support the holistic needs of graduate students.

Benefits of Collaborative Programs

Any attempt by student affairs professionals to expand their graduate student support programs should not aim to usurp the role faculty members play in shaping the graduate experience. Rather, changes should be pursued in partnership with academic affairs for a multitude of reasons. First, faculty members genuinely enjoy their role in advising and mentoring graduate students (Bair et al., 2004; O'Meara et al., 2013). These relationships are an important part of faculty members' experience, and attempts to take that opportunity away from our partners in academic affairs will likely be met with resistance and animosity.

Second, some of the needs that graduate students have are most appropriately met by faculty members. Faculty are the experts on topics such as professional networking, procuring funding, and research experience, and they should be encouraged to act as such. At the same time, there are areas where student affairs holds most of the expertise. For instance, students seeking advice about accessing university housing would likely be better served by the Office of Residential Life than by a faculty member.

Third, studies have shown that initiatives for supporting students are most successful when pursued in collaboration with academic and student affairs (Elkins Nesheim et al., 2007). Partnership programs promote higher levels of institutional acclimation, engagement, learning, and student persistence than programs pursued by academic or student affairs in isolation (Elkins Nesheim et al., 2007).

Partnership programs allow for a more efficient use of resources, maximizing impact by drawing on the strengths of both academic and student affairs to provide truly holistic support.

Examples of Possible Collaborations

A collaborative effort between faculty members and student affairs professionals is essential to implement holistic support systems for graduate students. In this section, I imagine how such a collaboration could change the existing framework of graduate student orientation and create new supports through student organizations.

Graduate Student Orientation

One potential opportunity for a collaborative program between academic and student affairs is in graduate student orientation. Academic affairs-student affairs partnerships have been extremely effective for onboarding new students at the undergraduate level, and this same philosophy could be applied to support incoming graduate students (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006). Obviously, orientation is a key moment for new students to connect with their faculty and learn about the academic elements of their graduate experience. It is also a great opportunity to introduce students to the campus outside of their specific program. In a collaborative effort between student affairs and academic affairs, these opening sessions could include presentations led by student affairs professionals to introduce the campus resources that are available to graduate students and provide information about how to access them.

Collaborative orientation programs would address several key stressors for graduate students. Introducing students to resources that can help them find community and support on campus early on is one way to proactively combat isolation. These programs also lay a strong foundation for combatting role conflict. In a collaborative reimagining of orientation, students are welcomed to the university with a program that explicitly acknowledges their needs both inside and outside of the classroom. By proactively acknowledging the interrelated nature of these roles and the potential tension between them, faculty and student affairs professionals create a culture of holistic support that can better address role conflict if and when it arises.

Orientation is also an appealing intervention point because it is easily customizable across different academic units. Given the diversity of experiences across graduate programs, even within the same university, different groups of students may require different information at the orientation stage. In a collaborative model, faculty and student affairs professionals can share their respective

expertise to identify the needs of students in a particular program and tailor the orientation presentations to address those needs.

Graduate Student Organizations and Identity Groups

At institutions with established graduate student support programs, graduate student organizations have proved to be one of the most effective interventions (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Organizations foster increased social interactions between students, create opportunities for professional development and mentoring, and support students' feeling of connection to one another and to the campus (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Nguyen & Larson, 2017). A partnership between student affairs and academic affairs can help diversify the purposes and services of student organizations. By co-advising graduate student organizations, student affairs professionals and faculty members can meet multiple programmatic and developmental needs for organization members.

Sharing the responsibility for advising graduate student groups between faculty members and student affairs practitioners could allow for the existence of more organizations, diversifying the available opportunities. This diversification is important because students may have different expectations regarding the purpose of graduate student organizations. For instance, Gardner and Barnes' (2007) study of American doctoral students found that their participants sought professional development opportunities from their student organizations rather than a sense of belonging. Nguyen and Larson (2017), on the other hand, studied international graduate students and found that fostering belonging and community was an extremely important part of student organization membership for that population.

An expansion of graduate student organizations that are based on a shared identity or experience could be essential in supporting the needs of minoritized graduate students. Women and students of color experience higher rates of attrition from Ph.D. programs than White male students, frequently citing lack of support and isolation as primary reasons for leaving (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). Providing students with opportunities to find identity-based affinity and community can help alleviate feelings of isolation and improve retention rates for groups that remain underrepresented in graduate education. Collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals supports these efforts by increasing the number of advisors available to support more student organizations.

Conclusion

Graduate student services is a gradually emerging and expanding functional area in student affairs. As new initiatives develop, it is vital that student affairs professionals pursue them in conjunction with faculty members. In this article, I presented recommendations for applying existing best practices in academic affairs partnerships to new programs that serve graduate students. The existing body of literature on graduate student affairs has documented the challenges that graduate students are facing, but very few studies have presented solutions to those challenges. Even fewer have examined the effectiveness of programs that are already in place. Student affairs leaders must recognize graduate students as an indispensable constituency within their community, and work to expand the existing body of knowledge about how to help these students. Today's graduate students are the leaders of tomorrow's academia, and it is up to us to ensure that they succeed.

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