EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT FOR WORKING, GRADUATE STUDENTS

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To The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 4, 2019
Abstract

This study examined how student involvement impacts working, graduate students at a large, private Ivy-League institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six graduate students who were enrolled or recently graduated from a Master of Science program, worked at least part-time, and held a leadership position within a student organization. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Transcripts were analyzed using an IPA method to identify themes. Three major themes emerged: social benefits, soft skill development, and time management. Findings from this study suggest that working, graduate students benefit both personally and professionally from student involvement experiences. Additionally, findings suggest that this population suffers from role conflict. Recommendations for practices are shared and suggest that higher education professionals should encourage, promote, and build involvement experiences to support working, graduate students in their growth and development.

Keywords: graduate student involvement, working students, graduate student experience, graduate education, role-conflict
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Acknowledgments

A special thanks to my two advisors, Dr. John LaBrie and Dr. Mounira Morris. Dr. LaBrie helped formulate my ideas and concepts that led me successfully through the first phases of the dissertation journey. His knowledge and expertise in graduate and professional education inspired me to think beyond the confounds of my original focus and look broadly at how graduate and professional education is shaping the future of work. Dr. Morris coached me through the final stages of this journey and made transitioning advisors’ mid-way as seamless as possible. Her wisdom, diligence and guidance were essential to the completion of this study. Thank you to the both of you for educating, coaching, and motivating me to become a thought-leader in higher education.

A final thank you goes to my third reader, Dr. Monique Drucker. Dr. Drucker saw potential in me when I could not see it myself. Her motivation and support have been a constant in my life and throughout my educational journey. She assisted me in finding my calling in life and has been a source of inspiration to me as a woman, leader, and professional. I am living proof that student affairs professionals can have a lifelong impact on students – for me, that professional was Dr. Monique Drucker.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. A special feeling of gratitude goes to my parents, Charlie and Diane, whom without their support I would be lost. From a young age, they taught me the value of hard work and perseverance. Throughout my life they have given me countless life lessons that have turned me into the woman and scholar I am today. Mom, your voice continues to play in my head “you can if you think you can” every time I am faced with an obstacle that life throws my way. Your constant guidance and unwavering love have given me the strength I need to carry on throughout my challenging, yet rewarding life. Dad, you have forever been my role model and mentor in life. Since I was a little girl, you have been my biggest fan and my greatest support. You have been my metaphorical safety net throughout life and, because of you, I allowed myself to step outside of my comfort zone and test my limits. There is no doubt that without the both of you, my success story would be non-existent. Thank you for being my biggest advocates, my unwavering rocks, and my north star that helped me find my way back home.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Ed. I am a true believer that people are brought into your life at certain times for specific reasons. I could not be more humbled to have married someone who has been so supportive since day one. You give me clarity in this often-chaotic life. You have taken on my dreams as if they were your own and have never let me give up. Throughout this doctoral journey, you have been my sounding board, my care taker, and my biggest cheerleader. Without you, this process would have been much more difficult. I am proud to have you by my side and this degree is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for choosing me and for letting me live out my dreams each and every day.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to examine how working, graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives. Knowledge generated is expected to inform student affairs practitioners on how to develop and enhance best practices around graduate student engagement opportunities that support learning outside of the classroom. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the statement of the problem and its significance. Next, the justification, key terminology, deficiencies, and the audience will be discussed. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

Statement of the Problem

Student affairs practitioners have long researched how and why undergraduate students get involved in campus life as well as the impact that those involvement opportunities have on the student experience. However, there is little known about the working, graduate student and how or why they get involved. Even less is known about the impact that student involvement can have on the graduate student experience. Failure to better understand student involvement from the working, graduate student perspective may result in a continued absence and disconnect between students, academic departments, and campus wide student affairs divisions (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Therefore, this study sought to examine the self-perceived benefits for student involvement for working, graduate students.

Significance of Research Problem

Little is known about how working graduate students understand and find meaning in the value and importance of student involvement opportunities. Many of the studies performed on the effects of student involvement and the effects of working while in school are depicted
through the eyes of the undergraduate student experience. Pontius and Harper (2006) explain that studies have found undergraduate student engagement, both inside and outside of the classroom, to be positively correlated to a variety of gains and outcomes. Student engagement has been linked to positively affecting cognitive and intellectual skill development, college adjustment, moral and ethical development, persistence, practical competence and skill transferability, and psychosocial development and positive images of self (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Research shows that working full-time, off-campus jobs decreases the time and energy a student can devote to their academic experience which ultimately puts the student at risk for drop-out (Astin, 1984; Schoffstall & Arendt, 2014). As employment is extremely common with graduate students in professional graduate programs, it would be important to know and understand if these same attributes extend to the adult population.

Between 2014 and 2025, graduate student enrollment is projected to increase by an additional 21%, bringing the population up to 3.5 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). A large percentage of these graduate students are working part- or full-time while balancing the demands of their academic programs (Davis, 2012). The numbers are a clear indication that more needs to be known about this ever-growing demographic. At some institutions, graduate students are provided with student involvement best practices found to be successful in an undergraduate student environment. Student affairs practitioners are struggling to develop demographically appropriate opportunities for working graduate students to get involved and potentially benefit from these experiences.

With the findings of this study, student affairs practitioners can better serve the growing population of working graduate students in order to enhance their student experience. Institutions will benefit from enhancing appropriate involvement opportunities because students will be more likely to persist to degree completion. This ultimately benefits institutions because they could
potentially retain talented and qualified students in which they have invested time and money in through recruitment costs, assistantships, fellowships, and professional development initiatives (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

Furthermore, graduate education is becoming increasingly important to the health and growth of the United States economy (Duranczyk, Franko, Osifuye, Barton, & Higbee, 2015). Graduate curriculum helps support the future and emerging employment trends (Duranczyk et al., 2015). Providing an enhanced graduate experience that promotes engagement is integral to degree completion which ultimately results in a better economy and workforce.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

The U.S. Department of Education reported a 57% increase in the number of students entering graduate programs over the past two decades (Gardner & Barker, 2015). Of this cohort, approximately 1.9 million graduate students were working full-time (Davis, 2012). Student affairs practitioners struggle to connect the needs of working graduate students and how they may be addressed by applying traditional undergraduate engagement methods such as clubs and organizations, campus-wide events, new student orientation, and others.

Graduate students tend to be older, and have had numerous life experiences that include professional and personal endeavors that have made them more mature as individuals. In addition, they tend to come to school with a lot more at stake; whether it be families, significant others, careers, etc. Graduate students who work take on a dual-role as both student and employee. Wyland, Winkel, Lester, and Hanson-Rasmussen (2015) found that students who engage in their student experience can positively affect their work outcomes. The graduate experience is more in line with that of a professional community that emphasizes independence, writing, and initiative (Mears, Scaggs, Ladny, Lindsey, & Ranson, 2015).
Research Problem

Student affairs practitioners know little about how working graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives. Many studies have linked undergraduate student involvement to increased degree completion, higher grade point averages, and an increased sense of belonging (Astin, 1984). Although the working graduate student population has continued to grow over the past few decades, conversations about student involvement efforts have focused almost exclusively on undergraduates (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Graduate students, especially those who work full-time, have very different and specific needs that are often neglected by their college or university.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study of working graduate students from a large, private Ivy-League institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States was to explore the self-perceived benefits of student involvement. This was seen as a building block of knowledge which serves as a pre-cursor to better understanding other possible benefits for adult graduate students on our campuses. The central research question to this study was: How do working, graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives?

This question aimed to understand the outcomes of student involvement for a working graduate student population. Essentially, it sought to get at the core of why graduate students who work find it necessary to get involved in student clubs and organizations. Graduate students, especially those who work, are already stretched for time and face challenges related to their roles as student, employee, spouse, parent and many others. An individual has limited time and energy so understanding why working graduate students find time to get involved is important in
the creation of best practices. Theorists who study role conflict explain that institutions are in competition for student’s time and energy (Marks, 1977). This study examined how working graduate students understand the benefits of student involvement and ultimately explains why students choose to get involved and dedicate time and energy to these experiences.

**Key Terminology**

Involved students are those that spend extra time on campus, participate actively in student organizations, and build strong relationships with faculty, staff, and students (Astin, 1984). Graduate student involvement often takes the form of engaging with academic departments, orientation programs, professional development activities, and/or student organizations and activities (Schlemper, 2011). Astin understood the term involvement through his lens as a psychologist. He believes that the concept resembles what theorists referred to as time-on-task or the concept of effort (Astin, 1984). Additionally, Astin provided a list of verbs that helped to explain how the term involvement is defined. Some of these verbs include: engage in, join in, participate in, take part in, and undertake. Involvement is a behavioral term and emphasizes how a student acts or behaves and what they do during their experience at a given institution (Astin, 1984).

For the purpose of this study, student involvement referred to those students who held a leadership position within a student organization. These are students who have chosen to take on a leadership position by either signing up for or being elected to manage and run a graduate student organization.

**Student Involvement** – Involved students are those that spend extra time on campus, participate actively in student organizations, and build strong relationships with faculty, staff, and students (Astin, 1984).
**Graduate Student** – A student who has earned a bachelor’s degree and is pursuing additional education in a specific field (Education USA, 2015).

**Professional Master’s Degree** – A modern-day approach to the traditional Master’s degree which focuses on training professionals through academic and experiential learning in order to keep pace with the changing needs of industry (Tavares & Silva, 2014).

**Working** – Students who work 10 or more hours per week and receive some form of compensation in return.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Current best practices do not address how working graduate students understand and benefit from student involvement. In addition, the field has yet to clarify if best practices geared toward an undergraduate population could or should be applied to the working, graduate student population. In my experience working as a student affairs practitioner, there has been little to no conversations about this topic at larger national association conferences. Practitioners struggle to understand the needs of this very distinct, yet growing population. The field has taken a “throw it to the wall and see if it sticks” approach instead of utilizing research to understand best practices.

**Audience**

Utilizing a qualitative approach, working professionals who held leadership positions within student organizations at a large, private Ivy-League institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States were interviewed. By speaking with this demographic, the researcher was able to better understand how working graduate students make sense of student involvement and also how they benefit from student involvement opportunities. In addition, higher education researchers can continue to explore the needs and types of involvement opportunities for this population in order to enhance this area of study. By shedding light on the complex array of factors that influence student involvement amongst working graduate students, the unique nature
of the group’s experience becomes clearer and the need for further research is evident (Kahu, 2013).

**Theoretical Framework**

The benefits of undergraduate student involvement have long been studied in the field of higher education. In the 1970s, Alexander Astin developed the student involvement theory which has served as the foundation for understanding how students benefit from being involved. Based off his longitudinal study of college dropouts, Astin identified factors in the college environment that affect student persistence while in college. Astin (1984) defines student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student puts into their academic experience. Astin also identifies involvement by studying the behavioral aspects of a student and provides a list of verbs as examples of what he means. Some of these words include: attach oneself to, engage in, join in, take an interest in, take part in, and undertake, among others. These aspects look at what a student does and how they behave to define and identify involvement. Students serve as active members and participants in their learning process. The theory views involvement along a continuum in which students have different degrees of involvement in a given object at different times (Astin, 1984). For example, a student can serve as President of Student Government one semester and then step down from their position the next and serve in a general member capacity. Both of these roles have varying levels of requirements when it comes to time and psychological energy.

Astin (1984) explains involvement in both qualitative and quantitative terms. To quantitatively understand a student’s involvement, you may look at the amount of hours a student spends working with a student organization. To look at involvement qualitatively, you may seek to understand whether or not the student has taken an active role in the student organization by planning an event or holding an executive position rather than taking a passive
role. Furthermore, he explains that the amount of student learning or personal development that is a result of any educational program is directly related to the quality and quantity of student involvement within that program (Astin, 1984). In addition, Astin found that educational policy or program effectiveness is directly related to the policy or program’s ability to increase student involvement.

The theory of student involvement argues that a particular program must garnish enough student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development (Astin, 1984). Astin challenges student affairs practitioners to think less about what they do and more on how students behave in terms of involvement. In a sense, the theory forces us to be more concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development (Astin, 1984).

Astin (1984) identifies student time as the most precious institutional resource. Oftentimes, faculty and administrators are competing for a share of a student’s psychic and physical time and energy. Most importantly, Astin refers to student time as a zero-sum game. In a sense, anytime a student spends with friends, family, at work, and other outside activities, is time that is not spent on educational attainment and development. This factor is increasingly interesting when thinking about working graduate students. Astin’s study found that students who worked off campus at a full-time job spent considerably less time and energy focused on school work. He explained the amount of time and effort that a student dedicates to educational activities is a defining factor for how that student will achieve developmental goals and gains (Astin, 1984). In a sense, the more involved a student is, the greater amount of student learning and personal development will take place (Astin, 1984). An involved student is often described as a student who puts considerable amounts of energy into studying and forming relationships with faculty, administrators, and other students (Hutto CP Sr., 2010).
Undergraduate student involvement has been linked to a variety of academic success variables including higher retention rates, high satisfaction rates with the student experience, high rates of academic performance and cognitive growth, and higher rates of development of career-related competencies (Gardner & Barker, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I utilized Astin’s theory of student involvement to explore possible benefits that have been researched for undergraduate students to see if they applied to a working graduate student population.

**Critics and Limitations of Theory**

Hernandez et al. (1999) serves as the main critic of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement. They argue various points that ultimately point to limitations of the theory. First, Astin provides his own definition of involvement which proves to be inconsistent throughout the literature on the topic. There is no consensus regarding the true definition of involvement which could ultimately impact the conclusions draw from this research (Hernandez et al., 1999). Second, Astin’s study of college dropouts did not focus on populations such as adults, commuters, non-white students, and students who are non-involved on campus. Additionally, his study fails to address those who do not attend college (Hernandez et al., 1999). Third, Astin fails to look at additional out-of-classroom experiences and variables that could impact the outcomes of this study. For example, Astin does not take into account pre-college characteristics, institutional characteristics, or academic experiences (Hernandez et al., 1999). Lastly, Astin fails to explain or assess a point of “too much” involvement. At what point does involvement become negative? Astin’s failure to describe this may result in skewed outcomes favoring involvement with no parameters in place (Hernandez et al., 1999).

Another limitation that exists within this theory is that it has been built around an undergraduate population. For that reason, it is possible that graduate students will not be able to commit the same amount of time and energy that an undergraduate student might be able to.
Given the stage of life that graduate students are in, they come to school with a variety of competing priorities such as school, work, caring for loved ones, maintaining a household, and much more. This theory may place a box around the limited time working graduate students have to dedicate towards involvement. This structural deficit on time available for involvement by the graduate students under study may prove to be a baseline impediment for the use of this theory.

**Rationale**

The theory of student involvement has shaped the main research question. Astin’s research is frequently used in the field of higher education. However, there has been little research done to see if his work applies to a graduate student population. Astin (1984) has found that student involvement is linked to a variety of gains and outcomes that may positively impact the student experience. To better understand the working graduate student population, it was essential for me as a researcher to expand on Astin’s work. In doing so, the findings will either endorse the underlying premise of Astin’s foundational work or call into question the theory’s validity as it applies to working graduate students in professional master’s degrees. Either way, the discovery will be an important element for current practitioners and future researchers.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this study will help to further develop student services for not only working graduate students but all graduate students. So much of what student affairs practitioners do on a daily basis is done based on best practices for undergraduate students. It is time that institutions pay attention to this growing population and provide them with services and programs that fit their developmental needs. The landscape of graduate education is drastically changing. In the past, it has been left up to the academic departments to provide a full-service, one-stop shop for graduate students but more institutions appear to be taking a school-wide approach and attempting to build a community across academic disciplines rather than just
within the programs. Pontius and Harper (2006) explain that academic programs lack the human resources to adequately address the variety of needs of graduate students such as housing, counseling, career readiness, and wellness. Student affairs divisions have vast opportunities to better support this population. If we better understand the needs of our students, we can provide them with best practices that have been studied and created for them and not for a different demographic. By doing this, we increase student satisfaction and retention rates all around.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Researchers are projecting that over the next ten years, graduate student enrollment will increase by over 21% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Of this number, approximately 3.4 million graduate students currently work at least part-time while pursuing a graduate or professional degree (Davis, 2012). While the number of graduate students who work are growing, student affairs practitioners are taking a critical approach to understanding how students benefit from traditional engagement opportunities most often offered only to undergraduate students. Much of the literature available on current best practices focuses strictly on an undergraduate population, failing to address the needs of our growing graduate student population (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

The graduate student experience varies greatly from that of an undergraduate experience. The student demographic tends to be older and more mature because of the life experiences, both personal and professional, that they bring to the table (Wyland et al, 2015). Oftentimes, graduate students who work take on a unique dual-role identity as both a student and employee. Students often take on this dual-role for future benefits even though they know it will generate satisfaction in one area of life and difficulty in another (Nordenmark, 2004). For example, a student who obtains a master’s degree may be exposed to better career opportunities but may struggle to maintain a high level of performance at work. Graduate students who work perceive they will benefit for improved job mobility, increased business contacts, more negotiating skills, better time management, and high levels of interpersonal and leadership skills (Wyland, Lester, Mone, & Winkel, 2013); however, managing both of these tasks is not easy. Because more employees are looking to obtain a graduate degree, it becomes integral to understand how working graduate students can benefit from traditional student engagement methods. By doing this, student affairs
professionals can provide additional learning opportunities for students outside of the classroom to assist in their continued growth and development as scholar-practitioners.

Many studies link undergraduate student involvement to positive outcomes such as persistence, academic performance, and increased satisfaction with their student experience (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Gellin, 2003; Chickering & Gamson, 1987)). Out-of-class experiences often present students with personal and social challenges which encourage the development of personal and academic skills (Kuh, 1995). Student engagement has been linked to positively affecting cognitive and intellectual skill development, college adjustment, moral and ethical development, persistence, practical competence, skill transferability, psychosocial development, and positive self-images (Pontius & Harper, 2006). These undergraduate outcomes are integral to student success, but little is known about the extent to which they apply to the working graduate student.

Fischer and Zigmond (1998) explained that oftentimes graduate students may find themselves without peers they can relate to, and they may have responsibilities to immediate and extended family as well as other community and employer obligations that place strain on their time and finances (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Research also shows that the more time a student spends working off-campus, the more time and energy a student spends not focusing on their academic experience (Astin, 1984; Schoffstall & Arendt, 2014). By shedding light on the complex array of factors that influence student involvement amongst working graduate students, the unique nature of the group’s experience becomes clearer and the need for further research is evident (Kahu, 2013).

This literature review assessed the importance of student involvement for the working graduate student experience. It first examines the benefits of student involvement, then the impact of working on the student experience, and then concludes with the differences between
the undergraduate and graduate student experiences. Finally, it includes a summary discussing implications for future research regarding this problem of practice.

**Benefits of Student Involvement**

The benefits of undergraduate student involvement have long been studied in the field of higher education. In the 1980s, Astin (1984) developed the student involvement theory which has served as the foundation for understanding how students benefit from being involved. Astin (1984) defined student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student puts into their academic experience. Astin (1984) identified involvement by studying the behavioral aspects of a student. These aspects consider what a student does and how they behave. The theory views involvement along a continuum in which students have different degrees of involvement in a given activity at different times (Astin, 1984). Students, within this theoretical context, serve as active members and participants in their learning processes.

Astin (1984) identified student time as the most precious institutional resource. He identified the amount of time and effort that a student dedicates to educational activities as a defining factor for how that student will achieve developmental goals and gains (Astin, 1984). In a sense, the more involved a student is, the more student learning and personal development occur (Astin, 1984). An involved student is often described as a student who puts considerable amounts of energy into studying and forming relationships with faculty, administrators, and other students (Hutto, 2010). Undergraduate student involvement has been linked to a variety of academic success variables including higher retention rates, high satisfaction rates with the student experience, high rates of academic performance and cognitive growth, and higher rates of development of career-related competencies (Gardner & Barker, 2015). This study utilizes Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement to explore benefits that have been researched for undergraduate students and apply them to the graduate student experience.
Socialization

Much of the literature available on graduate students focuses on the importance of socializing students into their graduate student identity (Beeler, 1991; Gardner & Barker, 2015; Mears et al., 2015; Pontius & Harper, 2006; Poock, 2004). Socialization is defined as the process “through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership in a given society, group, or organization” (Gardner & Barnes, 2007a, p. 3). It is evident that graduate education presents a complexity of relationships and experiences that help students adjust and develop (Hardré & Pan, 2017).

Gardner and Barker (2015) found that student involvement played a significant role in a students’ socialization to their academic departments and disciplines. In graduate education, academic disciplines tend to have their own cultures which include specific qualities, codes of conduct, values, and intellectual tasks (Gardner & Barker, 2015). Graduate students who meet with other graduate students outside of class to form study groups or just to socialize find the social aspect of graduate school to be valuable (Schlemper, 2011). Graduate students often have disciplinary and professional cultures or expectations that add to the socialization required for graduate education (Hardré & Pan, 2017). When graduate students get involved, they open themselves up to engaging with their peers and faculty in ways that aid in their socialization to the norms of graduate school (Gardner & Barker, 2015). In addition, this networking assists in expanding their networks of influence which are tied directly to their future careers.

Student organization support. Student organizations provide an immediate sense of community and allow students to begin their socialization process. Oftentimes, graduate students are expected to socialize into a dual role of graduate student and professional in a given career field; student organizations often assist and support students through this process. Student groups offer opportunities that are neither planned nor organized by the institution; however, they allow
students to develop their core identity by engaging in opportunities offered. Students voluntarily sign up to participate in this environment of learning, practice, and socialization (Borges, Ferreira, Borges de Oliveira, Macini, & Caldana, 2017). Borges et al. (2017) argued that participation in these student groups demonstrates that learning occurs not only inside the classroom but through participation in extracurricular activities. Relationships and activities supported by these clusters of students support the personal and social development of students which often meets the demands of solving student’s personal and social challenges. Furthermore, graduate student organizations can assist in several areas such as advocating on behalf of graduate students, pointing out issues that are important to their population, and ensuring that the concerns of graduate students are addressed (Coulter, Goin, & Gerard, 2004).

**Discipline/industry-specific engagement.** Oftentimes, graduate student socialization also includes some form of professional development (Gardner & Barker, 2015). When students are socialized, they are being prepared for the academic world while also being prepared for the professional role. There is a direct link between student involvement and a student’s professional career goals (Gardner & Barker, 2015). Students see graduate student involvement as being directly aligned with their career preparation. Students believe that involvement opportunities provide them with the skills and network that is necessarily to understand their chosen career path. Students describe “the professional socialization that occurred as part of their involvement, seeing it not only as important but also necessary for their future success in their careers” (Gardner & Barker, 2015, p. 13). Researchers have argued that today’s economy requires employable students that are educated to think like professionals. Graduate and professional students need to be provided an education that looks beyond the curriculum. Industry and businesses alike are looking past the syllabus and are desiring students who have been taught how to communicate, be creative, and be team players (Renuga & Ezhilan, 2014). Participating
in student organizations may assist in the development of these skills. Students who join clubs are often tasked with managing budgets, working collaboratively, and planning events as a group. These are tasks that most students are not afforded inside the classroom. It is evident that graduate education presents a complexity of relationships and experiences that help students adjust and develop (Hardré & Pan, 2017).

**The role of student affairs professionals.** Pontius and Harper (2006) argued that student affairs professionals can and should play a more significant role in supporting the socialization of graduate students because of its positive relationship with persistence. Support groups, special-interest student organizations, and mentoring programs provide safe spaces for underrepresented students (Pontius & Harper, 2006). These opportunities allow students to feel a sense of shared experiences to confront loneliness, cultural taxations, and feelings of discrimination. Graduate school pushes students to build and develop their own professional networks. However, graduate students often fail to understand how critical engaging in a strong network is to the development of their professional careers (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).

Overall, the socialization of graduate students is complex and challenging. Due to their limited time because of outside obligations, it becomes increasingly important for student affairs professionals to provide concise and meaningful opportunities for students to develop supportive networks. The literature examines the importance of providing social support for not only academic needs, but also for helping students to cope with challenging demands within their personal and professional lives.

**Persistence and Degree Completion**

Vincent Tinto has spent decades researching student departure and persistence to degree competition. Tinto’s (1988) theory of student departure involves three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation requires students to disassociate themselves from their
previous communities such as a student’s high school and/or place of residence. This process allows students to part ways with past habits and allows them to adopt new behaviors and patterns that align with the institution (Tinto, 1988). This stage may impact graduate students in terms of their previous college experience. Students may need to separate themselves from the culture of their undergraduate institution to immerse themselves in the new culture of their graduate school. Additionally, graduate students may need to separate themselves from past relationships and/or other affiliations that may serve as a negative impact on their graduate experience.

The transition stage is often accompanied by feelings of stress and a sense of bewilderment which may become a barrier to students who are trying to excel in their programs. During this time, they have separated from their previous roles and are now in the process of trying to establish new bonds and community membership (Tinto, 1988). Students may struggle to adjust to the social and intellectual life of the institution which results in students withdrawing from their academic programs. This review of the literature previously discussed the importance of socialization in graduate school; indeed, student involvement may be an easy way for students to begin to establish a sense of community at their new institution.

Lastly, Tinto (1988) explained the incorporation stage as a time when students are challenged with finding membership in the social and intellectual communities of their new institution. Social interactions are viewed as the prime vehicle for doing this because they lead to relationship building with peers and/or faculty (Tinto, 1988). When students struggle with social interactions, feelings of isolation can arise and cause students to depart from the institution. Tinto (1988) suggested that fraternities, sororities, residence life, student unions, extracurricular programs, and athletics serve as a way for students to establish positive relationships which often leads to integration.
Researchers have been successful in finding a positive relationship between student involvement and persistence to degree completion (Astin, 1984; Gardner & Barker, 2015; Pontius & Harper, 2006; Tinto, 1975). Student dropout can be seen as a longitudinal process of interactions between the student and the academic and social systems of the college during which the student’s experiences in those systems continue to modify their institutional commitment, which can lead to persistence or dropout (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) argued that a student’s integration into the academic and social systems is directly correlated to their persistence in college. He explained that the more committed a student is to an institution, the more likely they are to persist.

Berger and Milem (1999), meanwhile, explained that early peer involvement strengthens a student’s perceptions of institutional and social support. These perceptions have a positive relationship with persistence and degree completion (Berger & Milem, 1999). Students who are not involved are less likely to view their college or their peers as supportive, less likely to be integrated into the community, and less likely to persist (Berger & Milem, 1999). It is recommended that students get involved early on in their academic journey. Students who get involved are able to grow their support network of peers, advisors, and faculty, which allows them to cope with the academic hurdles of a graduate degree (Schlemper, 2011). Academic and social integration are important factors of institutional commitment which ultimately affects degree completion.

Tinto (1975) explained: “Extracurricular activities may provide both social and academic rewards that heighten the person’s commitment to the institution and therefore reduce the probability of his dropping out from college” (p. 109). For example, joining a student club or organization may assist students in feeling a sense of commitment to their institution which may ultimately impact persistence. Students who get involved may be more satisfied with the
academic and social aspects of an institution which ultimately results in persistence to degree completion (Hutto CP Sr., 2010).

**Cognitive Development**

Students should leave their institutions as better thinkers, being able to take up the intellectual challenges that will face them in the future (Laird, Seifert, Pascarella, Mayhew, & Blaich, 2014). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that the greater a student’s involvement, the higher their growth in general cognitive and intellectual development during college. Gellin (2003) explained that when students get involved, they are often exposed to diverse points of view. When students work together, it often increases involvement in learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). In addition, these varying points of view cause students to question their own values and beliefs which may contribute to gains in critical thinking and understanding (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gellin, 2003). Students who interact with their peers have reported positive changes and growth in leadership abilities, interpersonal skills, cultural awareness, analytical and problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and general knowledge (Hutto, 2010). Furthermore, students who get involved may be more likely to develop a renewed interest in their academics, which ultimately affects critical thinking.

Gellin (2003) performed a meta-analysis of eight studies from 1991 to 2002 on research that reported at least one finding from either athletics, Greek life, clubs, organizations, faculty interaction, peer interaction, living on campus, and employment. The author found that student involvement in clubs and organizations provided critical thinking gains because students had to make a conscious effort to seek out groups that interested them, which, at times, resulted in a high level of commitment (Gellin, 2003). The opportunities and leadership experiences that are available through student clubs and organizations provide students with the ability to experiment with critical thinking as they interact with other students (Gellin, 2003).
Oftentimes, higher education professionals can forget that learning takes place outside of the classroom just as much as it does inside the classroom. Chickering and Gamson (1987) explained that active learning requires students to talk about what they are learning and to apply it to their daily lives. Student involvement allows students to take what they learn inside of the classroom and apply it to situations they encounter in their student clubs, organizations, or professional experiences.

**Conclusion**

The literature shows clear evidence that being involved in diverse activities outside of academic life as a student has distinct benefits. However, much of that literature and research has been focused exclusively on undergraduate students. Student affairs practitioners are left with the question of whether these benefits apply to graduate students as well. Student involvement has been directly linked to increased levels of persistence and degree completion, positive and effective socialization, and cognitive development. Each of these benefits are integral to student success for both undergraduate and graduate students; however, graduate students commonly must also balance work and family obligations as well. The work component of the graduate student’s life is explored in the next section.

**Impact of Working on the Student Experience**

Over the past two decades, the United States has seen an increase in the number of students working while obtaining a degree. Without work, many students find it difficult to finance their education. In addition, graduate students often have outside financial responsibilities such as maintaining a household and supporting their family members. Much of the literature available regarding the student workforce focuses on an undergraduate population (Calderwood & Gabriel, 2017; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, P., 1998; Triventi, 2014). When students work, they are unable to provide undivided attention to their
academic studies (Triventi, 2014). Researchers have suggested that working may lead to negative academic results, such as an increased risk of dropping-out, delayed graduation, or achieving lower grades (Triventi, 2014).

However, researchers have found that working while in school may also be linked to positive outcomes. These outcomes include efficient organizational skills and work habits (Pascarella et al., 1998). For example, if a student has less time to study because of the balance between work and school, they might be more likely to utilize their study time more effectively. There is some evidence that working while obtaining a degree is linked to positive career outcomes when the job is closely tied to the student’s career goals (Pascarella et al., 1998).

**Dual Role of Student and Employee**

Researchers have documented that students who work face the issue of holding dual roles as both a student and employee (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Wyland et al., 2015). Goode (1960) was one of the first researchers to explain the concept of role strain. Role strain occurs when an individual struggles to meet the demands of a given role (Goode, 1960). Graduate students may hold multiple roles: student, employee, wife/husband, son/daughter, teacher, and many more. A role often provides an individual with the ability to achieve life goals and allows them to act in structured relationships with others (Wyland et al., 2015). This definition suggests that individuals have a finite amount of resources to apply to the responsibilities required by a role, and taking on multiple roles might result in a depletion of the aforementioned resources.

Often times, individuals struggle to maintain the demands of each role because the demands vary across the board. Goode (1960) explained three sources of role strain: role demands are often required at particular times and places, different obligations are required and/or contradictory, and each role typically demands several activities or responses. For
example, the working graduate student may struggle to maintain high performance at her job because she needs to dedicate time and energy towards her academic studies.

The role expansion theory suggests that having multiple roles, as both student and employee, is beneficial to the individual (Nordenmark, 2004). This model suggests that having multiple roles allows individuals to benefit from social support, added income, and increased self-complexity which may result in future success (Nordenmark, 2004). For example, a graduate student who works may benefit from having social support networks both at work and at school. Their networks are doubled, which ultimately increases their likelihood of being exposed to job opportunities or other benefits.

Anderson and Swazey (1998) studied approximately 150 doctoral students in the United States. The authors found that substantial percentages of students were always bothered by and struggling with role conflict. Role conflict included things like not being able to satisfy the demands of various people, not being able to maintain a high performance because of the amount of work they had, struggling to maintain a personal life, and finding their experience difficult (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). Graduate students have explained that their academic programs expect that their responsibilities as students come before everything else, including work and family (Anderson & Swazey, 1998).

Part-Time v. Full-Time Work

Employers have indicated that any form of employment can help to supplement a relatively weak academic profile because of the skills students gain during employment (Evans, Gbadamosi, & Richardson, 2014). Time spent at work is less time spent on things like studying, meeting with professors for office hours, or working on group projects. Coulter and colleagues (2004) explained that heavy academic and non-academic workloads can infringe on the time
students have to seek out needed resources that may facilitate the day-to-day functions and/or performance in their roles as student and employee.

There are two models available on student employment, the zero-sum model and the primary orientation model. The zero-sum model of student employment explains that any time spent at work is time that is taken away from studying or focusing on school (Lang, 2012). Essentially, the more time a student spends at work, the more likely they are to have lower grade point averages. The primary orientation model assumes that paid employment is only an issue if the student is also not interested in their academics (Lang, 2012). In a sense, students who have low motivation and interest levels all around are not affected any differently by working.

**Full-time work.** Studies have shown that working full-time has a direct correlation to increased time to graduation (Triventi, 2014). Students who work full-time may suffer from role-strain, making it difficult for them to complete work assignments and to have high levels of performance at work. Evans and colleagues. (2014) explained that students find that balancing pressures of working long hours, meeting academic deadlines, achieving good grades, and maintaining a rich social life is problematic. Additionally, full-time work leaves little to no time for extracurricular involvement and/or the ability to get ahead on class assignments and projects (Evans et al., 2014). Students who work more than 16 hours per week have a significantly decreased probability of success (Body, Bonnal, & Giret, 2014).

**Part-time work.** Evans et al. (2014) explained that working 15 hours per week is an optimum number of hours; however, anything over that may become disadvantageous. Other researchers found that working less than eight hours per week seems to have the least amount of effect on student success (Body et al., 2014). It is evident that the research on part-time work is inconclusive. Pascarella and colleagues (1998) explained that part-time work, which is defined as 25 hours per week or less, shows some negative influence on academic outcomes. However, any
type of work can contribute to a student’s ability to socialize and explore working environments, ultimately positively impacting future decisions about their careers (Evans et al., 2014).

Wyland et al. (2015) explained that a strategic reduction of hours when school demands are high may result in a better academic experience. Employers may consider offering a slight reduction in hours so that employees who are pursuing graduate degrees are more attentive and less distracted while at work (Wyland et al., 2015). Any form of employment may result in an increased ability to manage time effectively, which can be translated well into the academic arena (Evans et al., 2014).

**On-Campus v. Off-Campus Work**

**On-campus work.** Some researchers have asserted that on-campus work experiences are more desirable than off-campus opportunities. Pascarella et al. (1998) explained that on-campus work provides students with enhanced student involvement opportunities and integrates them into the institution. For example, if a student works at the on-campus computer help desk, they are more likely to meet their peers, connect with faculty and administrators, and oftentimes have a better understanding of how the institution functions. On-campus student employment has been positively associated with student retention and success (Mitola, Rinto, & Pattni, 2018). Mitola et al. (2018) explained that students who work on-campus for 20 hours or less often face no significant differences when compared to those students who do not work. It is important to note that on-campus employment opportunities are commonly developed with best practices in mind. For example, libraries often have structured student-employment programs that focus on providing students with meaningful and supportive employment opportunities on-campus (Mitola et al., 2018). These types of employment opportunities may provide students with a structured work environment that takes their learning and academic pursuits into consideration.
Some researchers have found that on-campus work has also been linked to negative impacts on cognitive development when compared to off-campus work (Pascarella et al., 1998). Researchers have asserted that this might have to do with a student's inability to make a psychological distinction and separation between work and study time.

**Off-campus work.** Off-campus work is often found to have a negative impact on student success. Pascarella et al. (1998) explained: "It may well be that by absorbing a student's discretionary time, off-campus work has its greatest negative influence on one's ability to meet the normative requirements of successful progress through college" (p. 88). Coates (2015) explained that students who work off-campus tend to spend less time on campus. Approximately, 49% of all off-campus workers only spend between one to five hours per week on campus outside of class (Coates, 2015). Less time spent on campus may result in less time being spent focused on educational activities and assignments. Elling and Elling (2002) performed a study in which students who worked off-campus were found to have several significant differences in relationships with faculty members and other extracurricular involvement. The more time spent off-campus ultimately resulted in a loss of a connection between the student and the institution (Elling & Elling, 2000). When students are employed off-campus, they are less likely to participate in critical learning experiences such as getting involved. Furthermore, off-campus employment is directly correlated with longer time to degree attainment (Elling & Elling, 2000).

On-campus work may provide more flexibility than off-campus work. Oftentimes when a student has a job on-campus, their supervisor may be better able to understand and value their role and commitment as a student. Supervisors understand the student's dual role of being an employee and a student. When a student works off-campus, there may be the exact opposite outcome. Off-campus supervisors may see the student as just an employee. This ultimately
affects the student's flexibility when requesting time off to complete class projects and/or doing homework during the workday.

**Conclusion**

The impact work has on student success is important to understand in the context of this study. Oftentimes, researchers claim that there is an inverse relationship between the level of student involvement in campus activities and the number of hours that a student works per week (Lang, 2012). The literature shows that full-time, off-campus work has negative outcomes on the undergraduate student experience. In 2011, it was reported that approximately 80% of all graduate students worked at least part time (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Scant research exists, however, that examines the extent to which these graduate students are facing the same challenges as their undergraduate counterparts. Moreover research on how work impacts graduate student involvement in campus activities is lacking. This dilemma is the focus of this study.

**Difference Between the Undergraduate and Graduate Student Experience**

Researchers have frequently referenced the extensive literature regarding undergraduate student involvement and the lack of comparable research for graduate students (Gardner & Barker, 2015; Pontius & Harper, 2006). Graduate students tend to suffer from a “building-bound” silo effect which isolates them from the rest of the institution (Pontius & Harper, 2006). This silo effect is evident when institutions believe that academic departments are the main providers for their graduate students. These academic departments do not have the resources or expertise to address basic issues such as housing, counseling and wellness, and career development (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

There is a variety of research that currently exists on first-generation undergraduate students, which are those students who are first in their family to attend college. However, little
is known about first-generation graduate students who are first in their family to attend graduate school. These students typically have little knowledge of the written and unwritten rules and expectations of graduate school (Granados & Lopez, 1999). Students may be challenged with a lack of fit with the institution, academic department, or profession, so it becomes increasingly important to provide a variety of support services for the graduate student population.

Oftentimes, graduate students fail to understand the major differences that exist between and undergraduate and graduate education. Graduate students enroll in their academic programs and a variety of points in their life and may expect to be treated as they were at their undergraduate institution. Many students struggle with the transition to becoming a graduate and professional student. In this section, I will review the three themes that exist when defining the differences between an undergraduate and graduate experience.

**Extracurricular Involvement**

Gardner and Barker (2015) found that graduate student involvement is very different from undergraduate student involvement. Students describe graduate student involvement as more deliberate and more in line with career goals whereas undergraduate involvement was more about feeling a sense of belonging (Gardner & Barker, 2015). According to Coulter, Goin, and Gerard (2004) graduate students are a unique consumer of higher education. They are looking for services that foster intellectual growth, build expertise in a specific area of study, and provide enriching professional experiences.

Hardré and Pan (2017) explained that support that comes from building relationships with faculty, advisors, peers, and student organizations can have a vast impact on how strongly graduate students may persist to degree completion. Minority students may struggle to find this level of support due to a variety of factors in graduate education. These factors may include a lack of minority faculty role models and mentors, limited understanding of minority student
needs, and lack of minority student support due to the small number of graduate minority students (Granados & Lopez, 1999). The University of California –Berkley developed a Graduate Mentorship Program (GMP) that was designed to support minority graduate students overcome institutional obstacles and help to create social and professional networks that would assist them in their success as scholars (Granados & Lopez, 1999). Today in 2018, the GMP still exists at UC-Berkley. The mentorship program is now an integral part of graduate education and is backed by a variety of incentive programs for faculty. For example, the institution developed three campus-wide awards given to faculty who exemplify the qualities of excellent research and teaching mentors (Berkeley Graduate Division, n.d.). Additional resources are provided in the form of workshops that educate students on finding the right mentor, a course that is offered by the Graduate Student Professional Development Program, and recommended readings for students who are interested in becoming a mentee.

Granados and Lopez (1999) recommended that graduate student organizations should assist students in obtaining professional and academic confidence and, in addition, provide academic and social support, advice, guidance, and professional/career development. The difference is that graduate student organizations must recognize that students are no longer just consumers of knowledge; they are now creators of knowledge. It is important for student affairs professionals to assist students in their development as scholar-practitioners which involves assisting students through their academic, social, and professional communities. Many of the extracurricular experiences that exist at an institution may be directly correlated to the type of degrees they offer. In the next section, the distinction between degree programs is explored.

**Industry Expectations on Graduate Education**

During high school and undergraduate education, students are simply consumers of knowledge (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). However, when students move on to graduate school,
they are expected to become creators of knowledge by going beyond what is known, asking questions, and seeking answers (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). This shift between the types of learning may be seen more in line with the role of a practitioner than a traditional student. Fischer and Zigmond (1998) explained that graduate students must learn to critically evaluate the literature, rather than just memorize facts. In addition, graduate students become more responsible for their own career paths. They are no longer being pushed or guided by the education system; it is up to the graduate student to become a successful professional (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).

It is important to provide a brief overview of the literature that exists on the professional Master’s degree (PMD) given that the subjects of this study will all be pursuing this degree. Over the past 20 years, the Master’s degree has become more professionally focused and less traditional and research focused. Historically, Master’s degrees had not been popular in a variety of disciplines because the degree was seen as simply a stepping stone to a doctoral program. Master’s degree programs began to shift due to economic trends that created a demand for professionals who had a set of refined skills and who could be experts in their given discipline or industry. For example, the biotech industry established itself in the early 2000s as a science-driven industry that required business leaders to also have technical knowledge (Theodosiou, Rennard, & Amir-Aslani, 2012). Employers were seeking individuals who were not only technically competent in basic laboratory science skills but who also had knowledge and skills about finance, strategic planning, and marketing. To build the bridge between Ph.D.s who were graduating straight out of academia and had a highly technical background, biotech companies identified a need for the professional master’s degree. Today, many Master’s degree programs are career focused, applied, and industry-specific. The PMD is aimed at training professionals through a curriculum that teaches techniques, applied processes, and skills, and that ultimately
helps students to work in an innovative, ever-changing, competitive workforce (Tavares & Silva, 2014).

Theodosiou et al. (2012) explained that today’s employers are more demanding than ever before in their hiring practices, seeking fully competent and skilled entry level employees, and that they no-longer look to train employees on-the-job. Professional master’s degree courses often provide a combination of courses and hands on experience which allows students to have a real-world experience in the classroom. This particularly sets the professional degree apart from traditional Master’s degrees (Theodosiou et al., 2012). Lynch (2012) described the curriculum as being developed with input from employers which essentially supports and promotes the future career opportunities for the graduates. This process responds to the needs of both corporate and political leaders as a way to clearly articulate the partnership between graduate degrees and workforce needs.

The professional Master’s degree has been increasingly popular since the early years of the 21st century and enrollments continue to rise (Lynch, 2012). Enrollments in traditional master’s or doctoral programs have progressively declined, and academics are beginning to worry that this threatens the longevity of their discipline. The benefit of the PMD is that it prepares students for advancement into leadership positions within their industry. Oftentimes, these degree programs promote and succeed at having a near 100% job placement rate. Lynch (2012) explained that employers value the cross-trainings the PMD offers and asserted that it offers a much higher return on investment than traditional degrees.

**Institutional Focus**

Pontius and Harper (2006) provided evidence that most colleges and universities tend to focus on undergraduate students’ concerns, which results in less time and attention paid towards the graduate and professional student population. The authors explained this trend by
establishing four factors. First, undergraduate students often make up the majority of the student body. Second, research around undergraduate student development requires more attention and institutional resources. Third, most institutions assume that graduate student needs are met by academic departments. Fourth, because graduate students have successfully completed their undergraduate education, there is an assumption that graduate students understand how to navigate institutions successfully, thus they warrant less practical and scholarly attention than their undergraduate counterparts (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Overall, graduate student needs are often neglected, but they indeed may be just as important as those experienced by undergraduate students.

**Conclusion**

The literature has described a distinct difference that exists between undergraduate and graduate education. There is a direct relationship that exists between graduate education and career preparation. The graduate experience is “one that emphasizes initiative, independence, writing, and more generally, behavior that first with the norms and expectations of a broader professional community” (Mears et al., 2015, p. 284). Extracurricular involvement differs as it allows students to become more socialized and acclimated to a professional and industry-tied community. Oftentimes, graduate students get involved for specific career reasons whereas undergraduate involvement may be closely tied to someone’s need for a sense of belonging.

The rise of the professional master’s degree can and should be directly tied to a student’s need and interest in developing their career strategies while enrolled in an academic program. As stated earlier, these degree programs were created based off of a need from various industries that required students and potential employees to not only be technically trained, but to also have knowledge and expertise in a cross-disciplined approach. Students enrolled in a professional master’s degree program are trained to think as scholar-practitioners where they learn theory in
class and apply it in their everyday lives. This scholar-practitioner approach allows for an experienced-based learning opportunity where students are able to create real-world solutions for today’s society.

Furthermore, institutions are failing to meet the needs of a growing graduate student population. Traditionally, efforts have been focused merely on an undergraduate student population. Because graduate students have successfully navigated an undergraduate student experience, they are expected to know how to understand their role within a graduate community. Additionally, many institutional resources are focused on supporting undergraduate student success and retention models. Colleges and universities are failing to keep pace with the growing number of graduate students enrolling across the country and, for that reason, they have failed to create adequate support services that support graduate student success and retention.

**Summation**

This literature review was conducted with the purpose of researching trends in the current literature regarding student involvement and working graduate students. The review was conducted by identifying three themes within the literature. First, current literature on how students benefit from student involvement was examined. Second, the impact working has on the student experience was reviewed. Third, the review examined the differences between the undergraduate and graduate student experiences.

Researchers have long researched the benefits that undergraduate students gain from being involved. The literature explains that student involvement is directly correlated with a positive socialization process, increased levels of persistence and degree completion, and further skill development (Astin, 1984; Pontius & Harper, 2006). It is evident that these studies must be extended to better understand graduate student involvement and how engagement opportunities either positively or negatively impact the student experience. By better understanding these
outcomes, student affairs practitioners may better position engagement opportunities so that working graduate students continue to learn and develop outside of the classroom.

The research on working while obtaining a graduate degree is inconsistent. However, many researchers agree that the more a student works, the less time they spend on studying and their academic pursuits (Coulter et al., 2004; Lang, 2012; Pascarella et al., 1998; Triventi, 2014). After reviewing the literature, one may conclude that outcomes depend on the individual student when determining whether work will positively impact their success. If a student has high motivation levels and is working at a job that is directly aligned with their program of study, they may be positively impacted by employment. Due to the variety of factors that may impact how employment affects student success, more research is needed on specific student characteristics, particularly graduate students.

As mentioned earlier, there is a clear distinction between the undergraduate and graduate student experience. Undergraduate students are more likely to have more time to dedicate towards their college experience, whereas graduate students face a variety of conflicting priorities. Graduate students often work, have family commitments, and are actively involved in their communities. The time commitments alone create a drastic difference between the experiences. Furthermore, graduate education conditions students to become a part of a professional community which ultimately results in students needing to be socialized into not just an academic community, but also into a professional/discipline network. This socialization process can often be daunting and a challenge for students who are already scarce on time. Finally, institutions view undergraduate and graduate students differently based on the institutional mission. There is no consistent model for how institutions work with graduate students. Some institutions prefer that academic programs maintain their student cohort, whereas other institutions may view graduate students as a part of the institutional community. These
inconsistencies make it difficult to create a one-size fits all model approach for student affairs practitioners.

The research shows a clear gap between understanding how student involvement impacts the working graduate student. There are further questions that need to be addressed regarding the working graduate student experience, particularly regarding whether graduate students benefit from being involved or if they face more challenges than benefits when getting involved. Additional research such as the focus of this study can add a deeper understanding regarding the experiences of this population in order to better recognize how working graduate students benefit from student involvement.
CHAPTER 3

Research Design

The focus of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to examine how working graduate students benefit from student involvement. The central research question guiding this study was: how do working graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives? This chapter outlines the methodology employed for this study. It begins with the research approach followed by a review of the participants and procedures of the study. Next, an overview of the data analysis and the criteria for a quality qualitative research study is given.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understand the research problem. Qualitative research is focused on understanding a particular issue from the perspective of the individual who has experienced that issue (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies utilize case studies, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative, or interpretive phenomenological analysis. A qualitative study starts with a particular phenomenon and asks open-ended questions in an effort to explore that phenomenon. The researcher records field notes and analyzes the transcript to look for patterns or themes. Using the data, the researcher identifies themes which represent the participants’ experiences as a whole. Qualitative data allows us to clearly see which events lead to which consequences with a good explanation (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2011).

Paradigm of Inquiry: Constructivist-Interpretivist

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was selected based on the researcher’s philosophical alignment with its assumptions and its coherence with the IPA approach. Constructivism-interpretivism asserts there is no single truth, but rather explores multiple, equally valid realities (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivists have a somewhat dynamic view of the
world and view knowledge on a continuum. This paradigm views reality as an ongoing story told by both the researcher and participants (Boutin, 2010). Reality, in a sense, is not an object but a construct within the human mind (Merriam, 1991). The researcher must use deep reflection to bring meaning to the surface.

Constructivists place a strong importance on the relationship and interaction between the participant and the researcher. These two individuals create findings and answers from their dialogue and the interpretation of their dialogue (Creswell, 2007). Constructivists use qualitative studies to understand lived experiences. Their values are a part of the process and cannot be separated from the research process. Typical research strategies would include interviewing, observing, and analyzing which would directly involve the researcher (Merriam, 1991). Different from positivism, constructivists are not concerned with finding one best answer, but look to document experiences or processes of those being studied (Boutin, 2010).

By utilizing the constructivism-interpretivism approach, the researcher recruited participants to participate in semi-structured interviews to elicit meaningful conversations. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of working graduate students and hear their stories of how student involvement impacted them both personally and professionally.

Using these interviews, the researcher was able to identify certain patterns among all interviewees. These patterns reflected the experience of how student involvement impacts working graduate students. After the patterns were identified, a detailed analysis was developed.

**Research Tradition: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative IPA approach was chosen because of its ability to explain lived experiences through the perspectives of the participants. It was the researcher’s goal to understand how working graduate students make sense of their student involvement experiences. In addition, the study sought to explore how the working graduate student
population finds meaning in those opportunities and how they perceive the benefits they gain from being an involved student.

IPA is a popular approach for qualitative inquiry. Originating in the roots of psychology, this approach has gained credence within disciplines in the human, social, and health sciences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), the IPA approach is concerned with exploring experience on its own terms. Experience is a complex term; however, IPA researchers are interested in learning how lived experiences take on a particular significance for people (Smith et al., 2009). When individuals engage with an experience, they reflect on the significance and IPA aims to engage with those reflections. As Smith et al. (2009) explained, researchers using this approach are interested in understanding how individuals make sense of major transitions in their lives. Making sense of an experience includes reflecting, thinking, and feeling. This has direct application to understanding learning how working graduate students make sense of their involvement experience.

IPA includes a major theoretical axis, hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) explained that the IPA approach views human beings as sense-making individuals and, therefore, it postulates that subjects will reflect on their experiences in order to make sense of them. It truly is up to the participant to tell the researcher about their experience so that they can interpret that account from the perspective of the participant. This interpretation helps the audience to understand the experience of the selected individual.

**Background and Source of the IPA Strategy**

Phenomenology emerged as a philosophy before World War I. Leading phenomenologists were Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Marleau-Ponty (Smith, 2018). Brentano characterized phenomenology as descriptive psychology; from there Husserl further developed
his vision for phenomenology (Smith, 2018). Each of these researchers had different approaches and conceptions of phenomenology, which also yielded different types of results for research paradigms and methodologies.

Husserl considered phenomenology to be “the rigorous an unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Husserl was responsible for the development of phenomenological reduction, or the method of understanding a phenomenon free of cultural context. Essentially, Husserl wanted researchers to interpret phenomenon that was free of prejudice and judgement. The interpretation should be precisely described and understood as the participant has done so. Smith (2018) explained:

For Husserl, then, phenomenology integrates a kind of psychology with a kind of logic. It develops a descriptive or analytic psychology in that it describes and analyzes types of subjective mental activity or experience, in short, acts of consciousness. Yet it develops a kind of logic – a theory of meaning (today we say logical semantics)- in that it describes and analyzes objective contents of consciousness: ideas, concepts, images, propositions, in short, ideal meanings of various types that serve as intentional contents, or nomic meanings of various types of experience (p. 8).

Those who followed in Husserl’s footsteps continued to redefine and attempted to characterize phenomenology in a way that altered the results and methods of the approach. For example, Heidegger, who was Husserl’s assistant and succeeded Husserl as the chair at the University of Freiburg, resisted Husserl’s consideration of consciousness and subjectivity (Smith, 2018). Heidegger argued that we should look into contextual relationships as a way in which we interpret and find meaning in our experiences. He advocated for a fundamental rejection of the Cartesian divide between consciousness and subjectivity (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011).
Heidegger argued that we are always “there,” located, and involved in some sort of experience, and that sense-making is always situated (Larkin et al., 2011).

Heidegger was concerned with existence itself (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA requires the researcher to participate in a double hermeneutic. This means that while participants are trying to make sense of their experiences; the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant trying to make sense (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus, the researcher attempts to understand an experience from the point of view of the participants. In addition to this, the researcher asks critical questions referring to the materials which helps to make the analysis richer and more comprehensive (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Jean-Paul Sartre attempted to redefine Husserl’s vision for phenomenology. Sartre reflected on the structure of consciousness, viewing it as a phenomenon itself (Smith, 2018). On the other hand, Maurice Merleau-Ponty looked at the role of the body in human experience. He conceptualized how the body’s existence interacts in the world which was an innovative way of viewing the work of the researchers that came before him. Larkin et al. (2011) explained that Merleau-Ponty argued that the body shapes our knowing of the world and the experiences one has.

Tuffour (2017) explained that the striking feature of IPA is a “detailed and systematic analysis of consciousness” (p. 3) in line with this philosophical trajectory. Furthermore, he shared that phenomenology has been explained as a singular and pluralist endeavor which exists along a continuum. Key phenomenology scholars have created the framework of IPA. For example, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre created the argument that we, as humans, are part of a world that includes language and social relationships. As such, it is not possible to remove or escape our historical understandings (Tuffour, 2017). Furthermore, the IPA researcher cannot meaningfully detach from their own pre-existing world of people, objects, language, and culture.
The major critics of IPA have been Crotty and Giorgi. Crotty (1996), argued that reduction is required in a phenomenological approach and, that through the reduction process, essences of the phenomenon are brought to the forefront. The reduction process involves the examination and suspension of the researchers’ pre-dispositions about the world and research phenomenon being studied (Larkin et al., 2011). Giorgi argued that attempts to simplify phenomenology have caused researchers to fail in the area of reduction (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011). Giorgi (1997) criticized the step-by-step method that has been used to simplify phenomenology and emphasized the importance of reduction and imaginative variation (Pringle et al., 2011). Giorgi argued that many researchers were claiming to use IPA but that they have been more likely utilizing “naïve applications” of the approach in order to avoid a more robust scientific approach (Giorgi, 1997).

According to Tuffour (2017), IPA has been criticized for four major conceptual limitations. Overall, the approach lacks standardization and is subjective in every manner. The first limitation is that IPA fails to recognize the importance of language in that experience is always intertwined with meaning making (Tuffour, 2017). Second, IPA has been criticized for failing to accurately capture the meaning of experiences rather than the opinions of them. For example, when someone is describing their experience, it is nearly impossible to detach their opinion of how they experienced the phenomenon. Third, like other phenomenological approaches, IPA focuses on perceptions. This is problematic because, while researchers seek to understand the experiences of their subjects, they commonly fail to explain how or why these experiences occur (Tuffour, 2017). Lastly, IPA utilizes cognition in the approach; critics claim that the role of cognition is not fully understood and/or compatible with phenomenology.
Rationale for Utilizing IPA

For the purpose of this research study, a qualitative IPA approach was an ideal method for understanding the lived experiences of working graduate students and the impact that student involvement has. By studying these lived experiences with student involvement, this research study has begun to shed light on the complex ways in which working graduate students benefit from getting involved. Gardner and Barnes (2007) explain that no known studies have focused on the effects of graduate student involvement or the benefits and correlations that exist. Many studies that exist on student involvement focus on an undergraduate population. With the growing number of graduate students who work, understanding this specific population has become necessary. Triventi (2014) explains that many students need to work during their academic progression because of the rising costs of higher education. In addition, many graduate students hold multiple roles and need to care for families at home. There is an emerging need for studies that seek to understand the phenomenon of graduate student involvement in all its manifestations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007b).

An IPA student focuses on understanding the experiences of group of individuals. It begins with an in-depth analysis at the individual level followed by a hermeneutic interpretation to make meaning of lived experiences (Shaw, Burton, Xuereb, Gibson, & Lane, 2014). This method pays close attention to how participants make meaning of their experience and how the researcher interprets it. This study seeks to understand how working graduate students make meaning of their involvement experiences. This required a double hermeneutic approach in which the researcher needed to make sense of the participant trying to make sense. The result of an IPA study is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and recognizes the importance of interpretation, given that no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon exists (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).
Participants

IPA studies typically choose participants because of their ability to speak extensively about the research topic (Smith et al., 2009). Due to the close attention that is paid to each participant’s account, IPA studies usually have small samples, which allows for a detailed and very time-consuming, personalized analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) explained that there is no rule regarding how many participants need to be included. Participation selection is dependent on the depth of analysis, the richness of the individual cases, how the researcher wants to compare and contrast individual cases, and the pragmatic restrictions the researcher is working under (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

IPA researchers attempt to find a homogeneous sample through purposeful selection (Smith et al., 2009). Essentially, an IPA study should attempt to study a group of people who have a common experience and demographic criteria. This is dependent on how the researcher defines the study and how the boundaries of the study are identified (Smith et al., 2009).

This researcher aimed to recruit between six and ten participants, with follow-up recruitment should anyone opt-out of the study. The participants are enrolled in or will have graduated from a Master of Science degree program at large, private Ivy-League institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In addition, these subjects will work at least part time during their participation in this study and hold a leadership position within a student club or organization. The participants were asked to participate in an hour-long, semi-structured interview that was used for data collection. The following sections provide additional information about the research procedures.

Sampling Procedures

Purposeful selection was employed to recruit participants for this IPA study. This process allowed the researcher to find a group of people for which the research problem is relevant and
holds personal significance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The homogeneity of the group depends on two factors: interpretative concerns and pragmatic considerations. First, interpretative concerns are related to the degree in which the researcher can contain the variation that exists between the subjects. The pragmatic factor is a direct result of the ease of difficulty that the researcher has contacting potential participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants in this study were offered a $10 Amazon gift card to thank them for their time at the conclusion of the study. The following steps were utilized to recruit participants:

1) An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to students who are enrolled in a Master of Science program at the research location (see Appendix B). The invitation explained the study and provided information on how to contact the researcher.

2) The researcher responded to anyone who has expressed interest in participating in the study within 24 hours. The researcher conversed with the recruited individuals through a virtual video conference for time efficiency given the exigencies of their schedules. During the conference, the researcher fully explained the details of the study, answered any questions they had, and then provided them with a copy of an informed consent form via email to sign electronically (see Appendix C). The researcher then scheduled an initial meeting.

3) If the initial invitation to participate did not yield at least six participants within two weeks of the initial communication, the researcher repeated steps one through three until six participants agreed to participate.

**Procedures**

This section will present a detailed, step-by-step outline of how this research study was conducted. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process was the first step to ensuring the study was approved at the research site and the researcher’s institution before beginning the
recruitment and interviewing of participants. This study complied with all guidelines for
protecting human participants as the researcher completed the Protecting Human Research
Participants training course through the National Institute of Health. This section will include an
outline which will include information on data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations,
trustworthiness, researcher biases, and limitations.

Data Collection

IPA researchers utilize semi-structured interviews where there are set questions; however, flexibility is key (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It is important to explain the difference between semi-structured and structured interviewing when discussing an IPA approach. Structured interviewing is when the researcher decides in advance the exact questions that will be asked (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In addition, the researcher identifies what would constitute the required data, pre-determined categories of data, and the way in which the data can be analyzed. During the interview, the researcher reads the questions exactly as its written on the interview protocol and in the same order each time (Smith & Osborn, 2008). On the other hand, semi-structured interviewing is when the researcher has a list of questions in which the order they are asked is not as important. The interviewer has the ability to probe interesting areas that may arise throughout the interview process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In turn, the interviewer has the ability to ask questions out of order and also phrase questions in a way that makes sense for the participant and how they are responding. As Smith and Osborn (2008) explained, the difference between structured and semi-structured interviewing explains the theoretical premise that underlies IPA. Interviews with participants are tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a transcript that is later analyzed.

Data for this study was collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews. This data collection method allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences and accounts of
participant stories. These interviews generated detailed and descriptive stories that were analyzed and used to describe the problem of practice. In addition, for this study, the researcher utilized reflective memoing to expand on thoughts or ideas that were raised during the process of data collection.

**Data collection process.** Seidman (1991) explained that the most distinguished feature of an IPA study is the process of conducting three separate interviews with each participant. This approach allows the interviewer to explore the experience and place it into context. According to Seidman (1991), the first interview creates the context of the participant’s experience. The second interview allows the participant to reconstruct the details of their experience and put them into context. The third and final interview allows the participant to reflect on the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 1991). The following steps were utilized for data collection in this study:

1) The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gain relevant data about the central research question. These interviews allowed the researcher to gain relevant data through a flexible format.

2) When the researcher confirmed the involvement of at least six participants, the interviews were scheduled and conducted. During this process, the researcher explained the study in detail and answered any questions that participants had. All participants at this point were asked to sign an informed consent agreement (See Appendix B). The initial interview sought to establish a foundational relationship with the participants so that trust was built (Seidman, 1991). This initial interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. All documents related to the interview were protected in an encrypted password protection software program that was only
accessible by the researcher. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants to ensure confidentiality of their stories.

3) Following the initial interviews, the researcher then scheduled and completed in-depth interviews with each participant. Questions used were open and expansive to allow participants to speak at length about their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In addition, prompts were utilized to probe and encourage the participants to continue providing more details about their experience as a working graduate student and student involvement. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

4) In order to transcribe the interviews, Rev.com, a paid transcription service was identified. Full transcriptions were provided and the researcher reviewed each document thoroughly to ensure the transcription was accurate and the essence of the interview was captured.

5) The researcher participated in a reflective process of memoing. This allows one to capture specific details and/or observations during the interview process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the following steps adopted from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) step-by-step procedures for analyzing phenomenological interview data. For this study, all six recommended steps were utilized. Below each step is explained in detail.

Step one. The researcher listened to the entire interview recording multiple times as well as read through the transcripts to get a sense of the entire interview (Smith et al., 2009). This process ensured that the participant became the center of the analysis. This step also included the process of memoing, which encouraged the researcher to record their recollections of the interview experience and their initial observations in a notebook, in order to bracket them off (Smith et al., 2009). As Smith et al. (2009) explain, repetitive reading will help in developing the
overall interview structure and provides an understanding of how the participant’s narratives can bind together.

**Step two.** During this step, the researcher kept an open mind while beginning to note items of interest in the margins of the transcript. These notes identified ways in which the participant spoke about, understood, and thought about the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The goal of this step was to develop a detailed set of notes directly on the transcript. Here, the researcher was deeply concerned with the process of engaging with the transcript and with the outcome of their analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) recommend that these descriptive comments have a phenomenological focus and stay as close as possible to the participant’s explicit meaning.

Smith et al. (2009) identified three different types of focus for commenting. First, descriptive comments look at the content of what a participant is saying. Second, linguistic comments looks at the way a participant uses language. Third, conceptual comments engage on a more interrogative and conceptual level (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step three.** When the researcher completed their provisional notes, they attempted to find connections and patterns across their provisional notes. This shift ultimately moves the analyst away from utilizing the transcript to using their own notes to find meaning. Smith et al. (2009) described this as a process within the hermeneutic circle. It is an attempt to make the transcript more concise, focusing only on what is crucial at this point. The themes that emerge are not only narrative in form, but also include the researcher’s interpretation of what has been said (Smith et al., 2009). This is one of the most important aspects of an IPA study. The emergent themes reflected an understanding of the participant’s experience.
Step four. The next step required the researcher to map out how they thought the themes fit together (Smith et al., 2009). This involved identifying the more interesting and important aspects of what the participant had explained.

Smith et al. (2009) identified six specific ways to identify patterns between themes. Abstraction involves putting like themes together and identifying a new cluster whereas subsumption is when an emergent theme brings together a series of related themes. Polarization is when oppositional relationships between themes allow for a focus on differences rather than similarity. Contextualization allows the researcher to identify groups of contextual or narrative themes that relate to key life events. Numeration is reflective of the frequency of which an emergent themes appear throughout the transcript. Finally, emergent themes can be looked at for their function within a transcript. Looking at the function of language allows the researcher to draw on ideas from the narration by coupling them with the experience of the participant. Smith et al. (2009) encouraged the use of multiple methods for organizing themes. Once the themes have been organized, creating a graphic representation of the emergent themes can assist the researcher in looking at the full picture of what has emerged.

Step five. The next phase of analysis required the researcher to move onto the next participant transcript by repeating the process. It is important that the researcher bracketed their ideas from the first participant while working on the second (Smith et al., 2009). It was inevitable that the researcher would be influenced in some way by what they had already found, however, it was important at this stage to let new themes to emerge.

Step six. The final step involved identifying patterns across participant accounts. This creative task often involves looking at ways in which participant experiences are unique in their own way or share higher order qualities with each other. Smith et al. (2009) explained that most often the final result is a table of themes that show how themes fall within superordinate themes.
Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2007) explained that researchers will face many ethical issues that arise during data collection and analysis. For this study, the researcher ensured the confidentiality of the participants by utilizing pseudonyms and developing case studies of individuals that reflected a summary of their experience rather than their exact experience. This ensured that the participants could not be easily identified. Additionally, in order to elicit participation, the researcher explained the purpose of the study but did not engage in an incorrect portrayal of the study. This was an important step to ensure the participants were well aware of what they were agreeing to participate in (Creswell, 2007). Next, the researcher did not include information that was shared off the record. This data was removed from the analysis so it did not become problematic for the participants. Finally, the researcher did not share personal experiences during the interviews to ensure that bracketing was accurately done.

Credibility

The researcher utilized three key methods to ensure the credibility of this study: triangulation, member-checking, and prolonged engagement. Conclusions that were made from this study were developed through triangulation across multiple interviews which assisted in identifying themes or perspectives that emerged (Creswell, 2011). Creswell (2011) identified triangulation as a key validation strategy in qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that triangulation ensures that the accounts are rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed.

In addition to triangulation, member-checking was utilized as a way to perform an internal check on the research process. Member-checking is identified as another form of
validation because it requires a peer to ask hard questions about the method, meanings, and interpretations of the study (Creswell, 2011).

Finally, prolonged engagement was utilized to ensure the researcher was able to become oriented with the context of the participants so it was appreciated and understood (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher participated in at least two interviews with each participant to ensure that she was able to build rapport and trust with the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that prolonged engagement allows the researcher to rise above her own preconceptions and facilitates the building of trust between the researcher and participant.

**Transferability**

Creswell (2001) explained that IPA studies should include rich, thick description that allows readers to make decisions as to whether or not the study can apply to their setting. These detailed descriptions allow readers to transfer information to other settings and determine if the findings are transferable. This study provided a detailed account of the participants’ experience so that transferability could be assessed.

**Internal Audit**

Utilizing Thomas and Magilvy’s (2011) recommendations, the researcher followed their method of achieving a successful internal audit by maintaining an audit trail as follows:

a) The researcher described the specific purpose of the study;

b) The researcher explained how and why the participants were selected for this study;

c) The researcher described how the data was collected and how long the data collection period lasted;

d) The researcher explained how the data was reduced or analyzed;

e) The researcher explained the interpretation and presentation of the research findings;
f) The researcher communicated the techniques that were used to determine the credibility of the study.

Additionally, the researcher utilized peers during the analysis process as described in step six of the data analysis step-by-step process above (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

**Self-Reflexivity and Transparency**

In trying to understand my researcher bias as positionality, I must first define how my positionality has developed. As Carlton Parsons (2008) explained, positionality is how socially constructed identities such as race, class, and gender affect one’s understanding of the world. In understanding new situations, one will always carry their own history, experiences, and identities (Briscoe, 2005).

Understanding the “other” which refers to other groups outside that of the group being studied, a researcher must understand that the privileged and “other” co-exist (Briscoe, 2005). For the purpose of this study, I, the researcher, referred to the “other” as working graduate students who have not participated in student involvement opportunities. I did not represent this group as inferior or abnormal but as a group of students who co-exist at the same institution as working, involved graduate students. As the researcher, I was in a unique position in that I have had both experiences of being in the privileged position and also in that of the “other.” Briscoe (2005) discussed the unique vantage point of having experienced both sides as a way to construct an accurate representation of the “other.”

**Undergraduate experiences.** As a first-generation college student, I entered college not knowing how to find my place. I remember stepping foot on campus at new student orientation, and pointing to an orientation leader saying, “I want to be one of them.” Quickly after my first semester, I joined the dance team, Habitat for Humanity, had a radio show, and was selected to be an orientation leader. I was placed into remedial Math and English because of my low SAT
scores and the fact that I was simply underprepared for the rigors of post-secondary education. My family struggled to understand my experience. I found an on-campus job as a computer technician which allowed me to get to know faculty and other students. I found solace in knowing that I had developed a strong support system with my peers and with the faculty and staff at my institution. I felt like I was a part of a community and that people noticed me. My extracurricular involvement defined my undergraduate experience and was the reason for many of my successes. If it was not for my involvement, I would not have moved on to graduate school.

Graduate experiences. In my Master’s program, I was lucky enough to have a graduate assistantship on campus, which allowed me to work 20 hours a week and in return, I received a full tuition scholarship. I was straight out of college and had little responsibility outside of school. Working on campus allowed me the opportunity to feel connected to various on-campus offices, go to office-hours with my professors during my lunch break, and access free resources such as printing. Because of my assistantship, I was forced to attend campus events such as homecoming, family weekend, orientation, and others. I felt connected, and I felt like I mattered because I knew people on campus.

As an online-doctoral student, I worked full-time at an outside organization and maintained a personal family life. I found myself completely disengaged from my academic experience. I was over 200 miles away from campus, knew only a few individuals in my program, and did not go to any events outside of class. I felt disengaged and experienced a lack of connection. Many times, I considered dropping out because of my lack of connection to the institution and my peers.

I understood the experiences and challenges faced by the “other” (Briscoe, 2005). If I had the opportunity to focus on my studies full-time, I feel that I would have been engaged much
more in my academic experience. I also felt that I had not been exposed to opportunities that would make me want to get involved at my graduate institution.

**Professional experiences.** In my professional role, I oversaw Student Life and understood the immense positive impact student involvement leaves on student lives. As a student affairs practitioner, I have spent the past 10 years encouraging students to get involved. I know from working with students that being involved exposes students to more resources such as easy access to staff and faculty, resources to expand skill development, and opportunities to build relationships with peers. Each of these items have been researched and linked to student success (Astin, 1993). In addition, I have had numerous students tell me that getting involved has changed their life. I understand the importance of involvement and how it can truly impact the student experience in a positive way.

**Bias**

My first bias as a privileged individual is that I have had the opportunity to receive both my Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education degrees, and I am in process of receiving my Doctoral degree. I am privileged in that during both my undergraduate and Master’s level experiences, I was able to fully engage with my institution in a variety of different involvement opportunities. I joined student clubs/organizations, met with my faculty members outside of class, and attended campus events; I truly believe that these experiences allowed me to feel connected and a part of a much larger community. With that being said, I was biased regarding the importance of student engagement and the role it can play in enhancing the student experience. Jupp and Slattery (2010) explained that historically and institutionally, schooling tends to reflect the ideologies of the group or classes that rule society (p.202).

In knowing this, student involvement may be a mainstreamed experience of the privileged. School typically is a place where specific groups prevail over others (Jupp & Slattery,
2010). When I think about the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality, not all are given a positive, safe environment to learn and grow. In addition, working graduate students tend to manage multiple competing priorities such as work, school, and family life. Some students do not have the option to focus on school full-time and need to work to support their loved ones.

My second bias as the researcher is that I studied students who have participated in student involvement opportunities that I oversaw. This has considerable potential to be a source of bias because, naturally, I would have wanted my office to have a positive impact on my participants. In addition, as the Executive Director of Student Engagement, there was a good chance that I would know the participants through the leadership roles they have been involved in which were provided by my office. As Briscoe (2005) explained, it is likely that research will benefit the researcher. I needed to ensure that the “other” had a voice in my research and that I adequately represented those students who did not participate in student involvement opportunities or feel that student involvement has had little or no impact on their student experience. I did this by reviewing my work and research outcomes through my lens as both the privileged and as the “other.” In reviewing data, I did not skew results to show a positive impact. I did not use this research as a way for me to negatively represent the non-participants to enhance the reputation of and expand my office (Parsons, 2008).

The subjects of my study had the potential to create additional researcher biases. When I thought about the factors that encouraged student involvement, time is not the only factor on the list. Things such as family support, peer-to-peer influence, employer support, and student grit all fall into play. As a researcher, I needed to be cognizant of the makeup of my subject pool and ensure that I had a diverse group of students who represented a wide-range of experiences. I hoped to recruit students who worked 10 or more hours per week and who had varying degrees of involvement as indicated by the number of hours they dedicated to their role within a student
organization. This allowed me to account for multiple contexts when understanding working graduate students and their involvement in the student experience (Carlton Parsons, 2008).

There were many potential biases within my research that could have affected the integrity of my research. Through understanding myself as the researcher and the biases I may have, I developed some key strategies to assist me in better representing the experiences of a variety of individuals. It was my hope that my research could be used in a variety of contexts around the globe.

**Limitations**

This research study had several limitations. This study was exploratory in nature and was limited based on its scope and the use of qualitative methodology. The sample size of six represented only a small cross-section of the growing population of working, graduate students in the United States. Creswell (2007) explained that for IPA studies, a narrow range of sampling strategies helps to identify participants that have common experiences of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, this study reflected some of the experiences of six working graduate students who participated in student clubs or organizations.

A second limitation was that participants were selected from the researcher’s place of work. This may have affected the comfort level of the participants to speak freely about their experiences with student involvement at the institution. A larger sample size might have produced or elicited more robust and rich data. Third, this research study was conducted at a competitive, Ivy League institution. Therefore, the results of this study may have been influenced by the unique attributes or characteristics of students who attend this institution. Fourth, the researcher chose to utilize a theoretical framework that was developed primarily for undergraduate students. Being that the theory was utilized to understand the graduate student experience, it may have constricted the findings because of its origins in studies of
undergraduates. Finally, the researcher participated in a double hermeneutic IPA study. With that being said, interpretations and findings that were made may be specific to the researcher herself. Other researchers may interpret the findings differently.

**Summary**

This study explored the experiences of how student involvement impacts the working-graduate student. The IPA methodology utilized for this study allowed participants to have a voice and allowed the researcher to create meaning and understanding from their lived experiences. The above standards for IPA data collection and analysis were followed to ensure the researcher’s biases were limited. Despite the limitations outlined above, this study contributes to research aimed at understanding how working graduate students benefit from student involvement experiences. This will ultimately assist student affairs practitioners in creating and enhancing programs that assist working graduate students through a positive student experience.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine the self-perceived benefits of student involvement for working graduate students. The goal of this research was to understand the lived experiences of working graduate students enrolled in a master of science degree program at a large, private Ivy-League institution through the lens of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement. This chapter is organized so that the data is presented through three superordinate themes. Under each superordinate theme, subthemes are developed for the reader. Under the subthemes, data from the participant interviews will be reported.

The super-ordinate themes and their subthemes were: 1) Social Benefits (1.1 Sense of Community, 1.2 Understanding of the University and its Resources, 1.3 Sense of Legacy); 2) Soft Skill Development (2.1 Communication, 2.2 Emotional Intelligence, 2.3 Ability to Motivate); 3) Time Management (3.1 Role Conflict, 3.2 Strategic Use of Time). Super-ordinate themes and subthemes were identified as those reoccurring in at least four of the six participants’ interview data. Table 1 provides a list of the super-ordinate and subthemes that manifested through the coding and analysis process.

Participants

This study was conducted at a large, private Ivy-League institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Each of the six participants are or were recently enrolled in a Master of Science degree program while working at least part time during the study. Additionally, the participants held a leadership position within a student club or organization. This section provides a short description of the participants in order to better understand their lived experiences.
Table 1

Identification of Recurring Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Susan</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Sunny</th>
<th>Vincent</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Terry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Social Benefits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Sense of Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Understanding of University and its Resources</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Sense of Legacy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Soft Skill Development</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Ability to Motivate</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Time Management</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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Note. “X” indicates that the associated subordinate theme (and related nested sub-theme) was linked to the corresponding participant in the data analysis process.

Susan

Susan, 26 years of age, was a part-time, Master of Science student studying Sustainability Management. She interned at Tesla in 2008 which led to her current part-time job as a Tesla sales representative. She was a former Student Government representative and was the current president of the Sustainability Management Student Association.

Andrea

Andrea, 31 years of age, was a full-time student in an executive-track program studying Technology Management. She was working full-time at the University that she attended and held
positions in Facilities Management and Student Affairs. She was the former president of Student Government.

**Sunny**

Sunny, 29 years of age, was a full-time, Master of Science student in the Applied Analytics program. She worked part-time in investment consulting. She was the Student Senator within the University Senate and sat on Student Government. Sunny enrolled in her graduate program after graduating from her undergraduate institution.

**Vincent**

Vincent, 40 years of age, had recently completed his degree in a full-time executive track program studying Technology Management. While completing his degree, he worked full-time at Western Union in the anti-money laundering division. Vincent was a former Student Government representative.

**Terry**

Terry, 26 years of age, had recently completed her degree in a full-time track, Master of Science program studying Negotiation and Conflict Resolution. During her studies, she worked part-time at the University in the School of Journalism. She was a former Student Government representative and the former president of the Association of Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Students.

**David**

David, 54 years of age, had recently completed his degree in a full-time track, Master of Science program studying Applied Analytics. During his studies, he worked full-time as a railway and pipeline accident investigator. David was the former Student Senator within the University Senate and sat on the Student Government.
Superordinate Theme One: Social Benefits

The theme of social benefits prevailed through all six participant interviews. All participants described that social benefits was one of the key advantages they received from participating in extracurricular activities during their graduate programs. Students identified being introduced to peers, faculty, and staff as a direct result of their involvement. Many of the participants explained that without their leadership positions, they would not have been exposed to people who have now become lifelong friends and professional mentors.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Sense of Community

A sense of community was identified by 5 of the 6 participants throughout the interview process. Students referenced that being involved made them feel connected and a part of a larger community of support. Susan described coming to graduate school as a way to study Sustainability Management and she found that she shared similar interests with her peers. Susan explained,

So for me when I got to [graduate school], I honestly feel like I found my people. I was like, ‘My people are here!’ And I feel like being around people that are just as driven or motivated, and are passionate about the same things you are, creates such a close knit community that I never had before in undergrad…I feel like I got everything I wanted in that sense of it's a great school, I have really insane community around me that I feel actually part of, and a leader of.

Terry also shared sentiments about feeling a sense of community but also being a leader of that community because of her role as an involved student. She described herself as the one that brought students together and as the one who created community. She shared, “So I think getting the students together really helps promote unity within the program and it also helps the students to get to know each other and I like being the one to bring everyone together.”
Vincent indirectly references that there is a community that he has been introduced to by being a part of the student government. He described himself as having been a liaison for the school community and as someone who worked with all constituents. He explained, “Considering that amount of experience that we have, we form a very, very good experience in being a part of the student government. The student government really liaises between the students, professors, and the school and it represents all the 14 Master’s programs that we have in the SPS.”

On the other hand, Andrea described how she benefited from expanding her network to individuals who are in other academic programs. The sense of community that was built influenced her professional connections. She described, Getting a little bit of information from every single program has been beneficial, because if I have a question about non-profits, I know who to go to, who'd be my contact there if I have a question about sustainability management. I have a connection there, so it really helps to really grasp how big the school is, but also I'm able to get what I need to know at a much faster pace than if I just shot an email to a random person. It has helped me.

Sunny was in agreement with Andrea. She explained that involvement benefited her because she got to know people in different fields of study. Sunny explained, “So it's been really interesting to really get to know people who want to go into fields that are completely different than mine, and then to learn their perspective or the way they think and their career path.”

Overall, the students explained that the sense of community made them feel a part of the University and helped them to get to know others.

**Sub-Theme 1.2: Understanding the University and its Resources**

During the interviews it became evident that being involved allowed students to gain a better understanding of how the university functioned and the resources that were available to
them. During the interviews, 4 of the 6 participants referenced that, through their involvement, they were able to interact with various campus departments and community members and make improvements where necessary.

Sunny explained that she benefited from being introduced to and understanding key university resources that supported her through her time at the institution. She shared, “I think it's really given me the chance to connect with a lot of different people, but also learn about different services at ABC University and really, you know, obviously try to improve but also benefit, and you know, I've really benefited from knowing those resources, as well.”

Some participants shared that understanding how the organization functioned also shed light on areas that needed improvement. As student leaders they felt empowered to help in improving these issues. Andrea explained,

But then like, when you really see the back end of like, how school's function, you're like, oh my god this is like, it's a machine…That is constantly going, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, there's, it's nonstop and your like money, organizations, funding, like curriculum, faculty, just understanding all the different tiers was like, initially my goal.

Terry shared similar sentiments. She explained, “Yeah, that also gave me a really great perspective of how ABC University, as a whole, operated. I felt like I could have kept going if my program was longer. I definitely could have learned more. I definitely think there are ways for ABC University to improve, but I also know that you could say that about anything and it's true.”

Through their understanding of the University as an organization, the students were able to gain experiences they would not have had if they were not an involved student. David described,

The people who I met on that committee, I think continue to ... I do a lot of analysis and investigation into policies and procedures from a standpoint of finding the gaps, what
doesn't work. This gave me an opportunity to actually see policy from the other side, which is the process of developing and implementing policy [for the university]. That certainly was a benefit that I got through student leadership that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

Each of the participants explained that understanding how the university functioned as an organization benefited them in a few ways. First, it helped them to understand the resources that were available to them. Second, it allowed the students to see gaps and learn how to make improvements for the university.

**Sub-Theme 1.3: Sense of Legacy**

Having an impact and leaving a legacy on campus after they graduated from their academic programs was a re-occurring theme and was mentioned by 5 of the 6 participants. Students described that they initially got involved because they wanted to give back to their community but then described a direct benefit of their involvement as being able to leave a lasting impact and improve the ABC University community for the better. Susan described that her role as a leader allowed her to improve the student experience and improve the institution for her peers. She explained,

You took time out of your day to create something out of nothing. Feels really good to know that I'm part of building a stronger school community. And if that's my legacy is that, when I walk away from ABC University, I knew that I did my absolute best. That the program has more value than when I left it. That people have an extra awesome experience. It's like a product. It's basically like, okay, this experience is our product, and how do we add value to what they're already getting, and how do we make it really fun. And when people thank you for that because they recognize that you added to their life, it's a really cool feeling.
Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the students cared about leaving a lasting impact on the institution. They wanted to leave the institution better than they found it. David explained that he hoped that future student leaders would build on the work that he did. He described the level of ownership that comes with being an involved student by saying,

I would say that by becoming engaged as a leader, you take a vested some level of ownership in the program. It's not something that you do and then you leave. I certainly would be saddened if this program five or ten years from now isn't a top program in the world and hasn't evolved to really fill the niche that it was originally designed for.

Susan and David focused on future students whereas Vincent, Sunny, and Terry focused on the current students in the program. Overall, each of them cared about making the institution better.

Vincent described that graduate student leaders often get involved for different reasons than they do at the undergraduate level. He explained that graduate students bring a sense of maturity to their role and with that have a greater sense of purpose. He explained,

But it also brings a kind of maturity over there in the person that comes with the time, but how we can give back to the community and how we can help to improve the life of the people that we know and how we can also help the school to improve in the multiple areas.

Furthermore, Sunny and Terry shared that being an involved student creates a sense of accomplishment. Sunny shared, “And then, you know, when I graduate I hope when I come back to campus I can be like, ‘Oh, that's something that I worked on.’ Or ... I think it's one of those things where you have more school spirit, or something.” Additionally, Terry explained, “And just feeling like you are involved in something bigger and more important and making the campus a better place for your fellow students and for future students.”

Summary
As the first theme of social benefits concludes, it is evident that working, graduate students feel that involvement has helped socialize them into their graduate education and institution. Several conclusions can be made from the above participant lived experiences.

First, all participants mentioned, at some point, that being involved introduced them to new people that they would not have otherwise met. Participants described meeting peers with similar interests and faculty or staff that supported them during their academic tenure as a direct result of their involvement. Second, almost all participants explained that being involved gave them a better understanding of how the University operated, which ultimately gave them a better understanding of university resources. As a result, one can conclude that when an individual better understands a large organization, it becomes easier to navigate. Participants described knowing where to turn if they needed to get a question answered. Finally, the majority of participants explained that being involved allowed them to leave a lasting impact on the institutional community. Ultimately, their sense of legacy provided a sense of accomplishment for most participants.

From these conclusions, one can easily see that working graduate students directly benefit from being involved because it gives them the opportunity to meet new people, allows them to better understand the university and its support services, and allows them to feel a sense of accomplishment by leaving a legacy behind after they graduate. In the next section, the second superordinate theme, soft skill development, will be described in detail. The subordinate themes will explore the re-occurring skills that were described across the participants.

**Superordinate Theme Two: Soft Skill Development**

During the interviews it became evident that all participants felt they had gained a variety of soft skills. Overwhelmingly, the participants shared that they did not gain as many hard or technical skills through their involvement. Soft skills differ from hard or technical skills in that
they may focus more on a person’s ability to function successfully within an environment.

Oftentimes, students learn soft skills from interpersonal experiences that occur outside of the classroom. Vincent summed up the importance of the soft skills he gained from being involved. He explained,

Those kinds of the things I really learned. That how much soft skills are important in the industry to really work with. I was always thinking about, ‘Okay, coding in the Java, coding in the Python, looking at the Oracle.’ All those skills, you need in real industry and that is what I have learned in the past as well. But with ABC University, I didn't learn all the software skills over here but how I can really work with my team and with my experience how I can influence.

**Sub-Theme 2.1: Communication**

Communication was by far the most referenced soft skill that all participants felt they developed and refined from being an involved student. Each participant spoke about communication skills loosely by 4 of the 6 participants directly referenced it. Each of the participants described how being involved taught them how to work with different constituents and how to communicate effectively. Vincent described learning how to communicate with efficiency. He explained,

I would say among the leadership skills that we have in the student government, those are pretty good. How we can talk with the multiple directors because at that time we are only seven or eight people in the student government and we have 14 months of program then the continuous certificate.

On the other hand, Susan shared that she learned how to communicate with empathy. Susan described,
And that's another skill that you learn from this role is, you're not just communicating to a professor in a paper about what you've learned, but more about how do you communicate with people, so that you can continue to work with them, and not alienate them so they never talk to you again, but also that they feel supported, they feel ... they trust you, they feel listened to. It's a lot of psychology.

Whether it was efficiency or empathy, the participants felt that their overall communication skills were improved because of their student leadership experience.

Each of the participants directly related the skill of communication as being useful in the workplace. Terry explained that refining her communication skills gave her the confidence to know how to speak with her supervisor. She explained,

Communicating. So learning how to, especially when you're nervous about presenting an idea to your boss or whatever, learning how to broach the subject, learning how to be warm and inviting without just jumping into a question or asking something.

In agreement with Terry, Sunny described her experience on the Student Senate:

I really learned a lot of communication skills in working with different types of people and communicating effectively with them, and so I feel like at work there are times when I just step back and just observe, and then there are other times when I'm more just forward and asking questions and things like that.

The participants described learning how to know when and how to speak up at work which is a communication skill that is not easily learned.

Susan described her experience as a salesperson and shared that student government helped her to become better at her job by teaching her how to communicate in a certain way. She described:
I think mostly its communication right now, because I am in sales. And so my role is to literally make someone feel a certain way by engaging with me about a product; therefore, it's very similar to when I'm running a board meeting, or when someone's reaching out to me with a complaint. I am now responding ... And it sounds manipulative, but it really isn't, it's more of a, how do I make this a positive experience? And how do I make people feel good and taken care of? It's exactly the same in sales. How do I make someone feel that way? And what skills do I need to learn, or what do I need to say, what words do I need to use, what is my tone, what it my face look like? When I'm communicating with a person about something that is difficult to communicate, or is something that they don't understand. How do I do that?

Overall, the participants described gaining or refining communication skills in a way that made them better employees and professionals. Their experiences within student involvement, helped them to understand how to communicate in certain ways whether it was more efficiently, more confidently, or more strategically. Emotional intelligence will be described in the next sub-theme however, it is important to note that participants described that they learned how to communicate with empathy.

**Sub-Theme 2.2: Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence was another referenced skill that participants identified as being developed during their time as student leaders. For the purpose of this study, the concept of empathy has been combined with the concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence encompasses empathy in its broad definition and for that reason the two are combined. Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand one’s own feelings, listen to others and feel their feelings, and then to respond with a productive expression of emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). From the interviews, four of the six participants said that their leadership positions
helped them to understand or be more sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, or experiences of other students. Many of them shared that this was a skill that they were surprised to have learned but felt that it has helped them immensely in their professional careers.

As someone who has been a resource for many students, she explained that she learned how to listen to the concerns of her peers as President of the Student Government. She shared, I think I've become more empathetic and more appreciative of the struggle that everyone's dealing with behind closed doors that we don't see. When, I think, students would reach out or they would be extremely frustrated, you have to really put aside your personal opinion and realize that mainly there's something deeper that you won't know until they start to open up. I think a lot of students tend to have ... They build walls both in professional and personal. That's just how they are, but when they start to open, you see a different side of them. That's a skill that I think can be very tough to grasp, I guess, because not everyone is empathetic. Some people are like, "Well, that sucks." I've seen that. With students, it’s like, "No, if someone's telling you they don't have money to eat, that's a real issue compared to someone who needs an extra pen." I think understanding and putting myself in that place is probably one of the biggest skills I've gotten.

Andrea described being able to understand students’ concerns and where they are coming from. Similarly, Terry shares that learning this skill has helped her to become more inclusive of her peers. She explained, “I think definitely emotional intelligence, which is kind of a broad soft skill, but learning when someone is quiet at the table and they might have something to say, something like, hey, what do you have to contribute?” This attribute helped her in her professional career as she has become more aware of her colleagues’ emotions in the workplace. Vincent shared similar experiences and spoke specifically to working in the informational
technology industry. He explained that, in his field, technical skills are often placed at a higher importance than skills such as empathy. He elaborated,

I would say in my professional career, it helped me to be more empathetic. I would say being in the technology industry, we are always looking forward for delivery. There is nothing else, delivery, delivery, and delivery…To really know the people very well over there, I think that ABC University Student Government taught me that how I can discuss more and more with the people, how I can understand about them, and how I can be empathetic with them to understand what are the challenges they are facing and how it can help them to cooperate. That was the one thing that really helped me in my professional career.

Additionally, Susan shared that her professional role in sales benefited from her experiences of being a student leader. She shared that, as a leader, she was able to learn how to communicate using emotional intelligence to make her more effective at work. She explained,

And so my role is to literally make someone feel a certain way by engaging with me about a product; therefore, it's very similar to when I'm running a board meeting, or when someone's reaching out to me with a complaint. I am now responding ... And it sounds manipulative, but it really isn't, it's more of a, how do I make this a positive experience? And how do I make people feel good and taken care of? It's exactly the same in sales. How do I make someone feel that way? And what skills do I need to learn, or what do I need to say, what words do I need to use, what is my tone, what it my face look like? When I'm communicating with a person about something that is difficult to communicate, or is something that they don't understand. How do I do that?

Each of the participants alluded to emotional intelligence but only one participant used the phrase “emotional intelligence” when describing their experiences. Four of the students referred
to what they have gained from being involved and referenced their ability to connect with peers or co-workers on an emotional level. Emotional intelligence was a skill that was talked about broadly whereas the next sub-theme, the ability to motivate, was spoken about specifically.

**Sub-Theme 2.3: Ability to Motivate**

The ability to motivate others is a skill that is beneficial for any leader whether in school or at work. During the interviews, 4 of the 6 participants referenced that through their leadership positions, they learned or had the opportunity to practice how to motivate others. This skill was refined through their roles in clubs and organizations.

Sunny mentioned that she has always struggled with motivating others, whether it was classmates on group projects or in the workplace. She shared,

And I think one of the things that I still haven't grasped but I think I'm starting to learn is how to motivate people, which I think is something that I've struggled with in just group projects and stuff, but I think through student leadership roles I've been able to kind of practice that.

It was through their experience of working with their constituents that the participants were tasked with including others and trying to get their classmates to get involved. Vincent agreed with Sunny and explained that he learned how to include his peers and classmates by encouraging them to get involved and attend events.

Susan shared that her position in a student club was similar to that of a manager role. This comparison was interesting because it directly correlated with how someone may use these skills in the workplace. All managers are tasked with leading a team and motivating them in some way to achieve organizational goals. Susan describes her experience in the following way:

[Being president of a student association] is absolutely a manager position. I am managing people. I do work on it, but I'm not creating deliverables in a way that the rest
of the board members are. And so I just am constantly utilizing my time in terms of following up with people, understanding what they're doing, how can I help them, who do I know that can assist with this role, do I keep two people connected because they're gonna hold each other accountable, making sure that everything is managed and we're reaching the deadlines that we want.

All of the participants reported that apathy was a challenge amongst the student body. Susan’s description of serving in a manager-like role speaks volumes. She felt she had to be their boss in a sense to get them to do things whereas Terry described her experience with working with apathetic individuals and the realization she had to come to as a leader. She explained,

Then also getting people to be involved. I feel like people are pretty apathetic sometimes, and you can either get a gung ho group of students, or you can get people who are like, we really don't care what's going on. We don't want to be involved. We won't go to any events that you throw, no matter how much free food you give us or free goodies, which I think is really sad, but there's nothing you can really do about it unfortunately.

Summary

As the second theme of soft skill development concludes, it is evident that these working graduate students felt that involvement has helped them develop or refine a variety of soft skills. All participants mentioned, at some point, that being involved had a direct correlation on their soft skill development. The list of skills was exhaustive; however, for the purpose of this study, the top three referenced skills were outlined above. Several conclusions can be made from the participants’ lived experiences.

First, participants described that being involved helped them to become better at communicating. Each of the participants described being able to communicate more efficiently and effectively because of their leadership roles. Second, participants’ emotional intelligence
was refined due to their experiences as student leaders and from being a resource for many students. The participants described learning how to become empathetic and how to be more understanding of people’s needs. Third, participants practiced their ability to motivate their peers. Through their involvement experiences, they had the opportunity to work in a manager-like capacity to accomplish the goals of their student organizations.

All participants referenced that they rarely gained technical skills but focused specifically on soft skill development. All of the participants referenced their ability to apply the soft skills they learned directly to their professional career. The skills they learned as student leaders helped them become more well-rounded professionals. From this, one can conclude that working graduate students can benefit directly from being involved because it gives them the opportunity to refine their soft skills. In the next section, the third superordinate theme, time management, will be described in detail. The subordinate themes will explore how time impacted the participants’ experiences as working graduate students.

**Superordinate Theme Three: Time Management**

The theme of time management was evident among all six participant interviews. All participants described that time was a key challenge they faced with being involved as a working graduate student. Students were faced with having to make decisions about their involvement, work, and personal lives in order to maintain their responsibilities. All six participants explained that there was never enough time to commit every area of their lives. Susan describes in detail:

Oh God! The biggest challenge is time management… I can't. It's so hard, and there are days when I'm just ... I don't get a day off. I got election day off, that was amazing. I went home for a day, and got to catch up with my family and everything that's been going on because I've been dealing with it from here because I go to school four days a week, and then I'm at work three days a week. There is no day off, and so sometimes you totally
burn out. You're like, "I wanna day," and then you feel guilty about taking a day because I really need to be managing my time better. I wanna have a personal life. How do I throw that all together?

All of the participants shared similar responses to Susan in that they all struggled to find enough hours in the day to complete all their tasks and/or responsibilities. The below sub-themes, role conflict and strategic use of time, emerged in all six interviews.

**Sub-Theme 3.1: Role Conflict**

Role conflict came up in all six interviews. Role conflict is when an individual holds multiple roles such as student, employee, student leader, spouse, parent, and many others. Oftentimes, the responsibilities that come with each of an individual’s roles are conflicting because they require time (Goode, 1960). With only twenty-four hours in a day, individuals are usually faced with roles that are conflicting. All six participants described experiencing role conflict.

Vincent described his role of being a parent, a graduate student, an employee, and a student leader. He explained that time became a challenge when all areas of his life were expecting things from him. He reported,

So, I would say the time was a major commitment from the students, especially from the executive who work and then they have their families and then they take care of the other responsibilities of being in the student government. I think it's a great amount of the dedication and the commitment which is required. Sometimes, it became a little difficult because a lot of things were going on at my work at one time and especially at the same time we were also trying to do a new event.

Additionally, he described that at the time of his final defense for school, his wife changed jobs so it required him to be more present at home to help manage the kids. Vincent described that he
would often find himself doing homework well into the night which meant that he was not getting the sleep that he needed so that he could complete everything he needed to do. Furthermore, he described that during his program he did not take any vacations and hardly had a social life because he just did not have the time.

Similarly, Andrea shared that her social life was frequently moved to the back burner because she had to go to the library and study instead. She said maintaining family obligations and her relationship with her boyfriend also added stress. She described,

And also I have you know, a relationship, like I have a boyfriend and like, managing holidays, my boyfriend’s demands, my family's demands, society's demands, my own demands, personally. Like, exercising takes you know, a back, they're in the back burner. Going out with friends takes a back burner, 'cause I can't go out and spend, drinks in New York City are really expensive. Like I can't go out every weekend. And you know, my friends are going out, taking pictures on like Instagram. I'm at the library just studying...And sometimes it's tough not to be envious but at the same time like, you have to like kind of pause. Take a look around and I think it helps being on campus. 'Cause the campus is so beautiful that you're like, you know what, it's gonna be worth it in the end.

David also described that while in graduate school, his responsibilities as both a husband and father were neglected. He uniquely explained that he did not realize he was neglecting these two aspects of his life until he completed his academic program in May. He described prioritizing his roles as a student and employee before his home life by saying:

It's a testament [to my wife’s] patience with me and I would say, it colored other things going forward. I had to learn to listen a little bit better. There was a great stress on the fact that ... and as I reflect back now, there are things in my role as a father that did suffer, or as a role as a husband that definitely suffered because I was engaged in what I
was doing. I wasn't physically at home. I was probably a unique case that way, but I wasn't able to be there when they needed my support.

Sunny, Susan, and Terry described the conflict between work and school. They described feeling like they could not maintain full commitment to all of their roles as a student, leader, and employee. Sunny shared that she often found herself explaining to peers that she could not participate in group meetings because she had to work. She shares,

I think one in particular that I've definitely seen this semester a lot is just scheduling. So I feel like a lot of my teammates, for example, for class, are able to meet during the day whereas I just by default can't, and so it's been hard because as a student leader you want to be in a position where you're leading and committed and you can show that, but then sometimes you have to say, ‘Well, I can't make it because of work.’ And I feel like sometimes that loses credibility of your commitment as a student leader.

Terry shared that she had to make a commitment to herself to only focus on the tasks as she did them. For example, while she was at work she would only focus on work and while she was doing school work, she would not take work calls. She recalled,

I tend to overextend myself, so I tend to have too many things filled up, then I stress because I need to get them all done. So time management really just, like saying, okay, when I'm at work, I'm only working on work. I'm not working on anything else or if I am, just making sure that it's okay.

Finally, Susan shared how she structured her time so that she could commit to all roles. However, she described feeling like she failed to give each of her roles adequate attention. She explained,

I've been trying be like, ‘Okay Susan, 9:00 to 5:00 you're just doing school work. Don't try to run any other errands. Don't try to do all this other stuff. Just do school 9:00 to
5:00,’ but then things come up, calls happen, I gotta drop something off downtown. And then it's like, ‘Well, then school is 6:00 to 8:00, so it doesn't really count.’ Anyway, it's just kinda difficult to do it all, and I can't fully capitalize on the experience in the sense that when there's cool events on campus, on the days that I'm a student, sometimes I still don't go because those are my only days to do homework. I don't have weekends to do homework, which are usually more chill days… I'm not fully in 100% to either thing. I'm like 80% in school, and I'm still kinda 50% in work. So I can't capitalize on either thing…And I think that's the hardest part. And it's how I felt last year was, I feel like I was half-assing everything. I was in school, and I felt like I was half-assing it because I didn't have a ton of time. And then when I was at work, I felt like there were things I was half-assing because I was like well, I'm leaving early all the time. And I'm trying to get my homework done, I can't do these things. I'm trying to finish this assignment in my morning. So it's just very tricky to do all the things.

It became evident that all participants struggled to maintain their responsibilities in all aspects of their life. However, they still managed to find time to be involved. Evidentially, the next sub-theme will describe in detail how the participants strategically utilized their time to make the most of their experiences.

### Sub-Theme 3.2: Strategic Use of Time

During the interviews all six participants referenced the strategic choices they made when it came to managing their time and getting involved. Five of the six participants described the differences between their involvement as an undergraduate and graduate student and said that graduate student involvement was filled with more of a sense of purpose which is why they strategically chose to get involved.
David made his decision to get involved because he wanted to acquire certain skills. He explained,

As a graduate student, you're coming with a purpose. You have already done, one would hope, some level of due diligence. You've identified a skillset you're wanting to acquire. You're probably pursuing something that you have some interest in, god let's hope. If you're not interested in it, I don't think you can take it to where it needs to go. You want to gain a skillset, but also a knowledge set.

Sunny shared similar sentiments. She explained that her decision to get involved was directly tied to her professional goals. She shared,

I think when I came to ABC University, I knew that I came in thinking I really wanted to focus on my career, and I really wanted to do things that would help me get to where I want to be after graduation, so I purposefully didn't join certain organizations that I think I would have if I was an undergrad.

She continued to explain her decision for getting involved in graduate school verses the decision she made as an undergraduate, saying,

As a graduate student, I think a lot of the involvement is typically ... it seems to me like a lot of the involvement aligns with your professional goals, whereas undergrad it's more about what are your friends doing, what do you wanna do for fun, it's not necessarily 'cause it's gonna enhance your professional roles or develop skills. It's more what you want to do at the time.

It seems that participants’ decisions to get involved were a strategic choice and a strategic use of their time.

Andrea explained how being at a different stage in her life helped her to make that strategic choice. She shared,
I'm going to make the best of it, I'm going to apply myself more, I'm in a different stage in life, I'm more mature, I've gone through the private market and it sucks, this is what I want to do, this is what I see direction wise.

Additionally, Terry shared that she knew exactly what she wanted to do with her time. She recalled,

Whereas at ABC University, I was a little bit more experienced and advanced in knowing what kinds of things I wanted to spend my time on and less caring about things that weren't worth my time, even though I could have been involved with them… I was kind of more of an experienced, matured person when it came to getting involved with student groups and student activities. I kind of knew the drill. I kind of knew what to expect.

Susan remembered that her choice to get involved was directly related to her satisfaction with her experience. She explained,

I think when you're in grad school getting involved is more like a self-satisfying thing. Because you probably are starting to know what you already like, and you're engaging to add value to your life. You're already investing in yourself in a different way.

She explained that she had a clear vision for what she wanted to accomplish and that getting involved would help her accomplish some of those goals.

Vincent, on the other hand, talked about how he strategically managed his time and responsibilities. Many of his decisions about where to spend his time were dictated by his responsibilities as a father, son, and husband. He shared,

I manage my time with how I can really work with all of [my colleagues] for eight to nine hours in every day…Then after coming home, this is our time, 30 minutes I'll give myself to be comfortable at home. Relax, have some snacks…Look at the kids, that how are they doing with their homework. Are they facing any challenges, do they need any help from
me, do they need any guidance over there and then after that, of course my wife is home. Most of the time she comes home when I reach home after 30 minutes. Once my wife is home, I just go to my room, open my MacBook and then look at all the readings and the assignments that are there. I used to spend around four to five hours every day in the evening and the weekends I spend almost 20 hours.

Summary

As the third theme of time management concludes, it becomes evident that there are challenges that come with being involved as a working graduate student. All participants felt that they struggled to manage their time and also struggled to maintain full commitment to each of their responsibilities. Two main conclusions can be made from the participants lived experiences.

First, all participants shared that being a student and employee while maintaining a leadership position was difficult to manage. They explained that, often, the responsibilities of their various roles would be conflicting and they never had enough time to meet the needs of all aspects of their lives. For the participants who had significant others and/or children, it was increasingly difficult to meet the needs of their families on top of their other responsibilities.

Second, all participants explained that they needed to be strategic about the use of their time. For the majority of participants, they chose to spend their time getting involved because it helped them to achieve personal and professional goals. Being a working graduate student came with a sense of purpose and allowed the participants to allocate their time and to prioritize what needed to come first.

From this, one can conclude that time is the biggest challenge that working graduate students face when it comes to getting involved. However, students can benefit from strategically using their time in ways that help them reach their personal and professional goals.
Conclusion

The purpose of this interpretative, phenomenological study was to examine the benefits of student involvement for working graduate students. The theoretical framework of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement situated this research. Astin (1984) explains that students who are involved in college are more likely to persist to graduation. Additionally, he argued that student time is an institution’s most precious resource and the amount of time and effort a student puts into their educational experience is a direct outcome of the goals and gains they will achieve from their experience.

The study sought to answer the following research question: How do working graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives?

Findings

Three major themes emerged as a result of the researcher’s analysis. They are 1) Social Benefits, 2) Soft Skill Development, 3) Time Management. The participants’ lived experiences provided evidence that student involvement provides personal and professional benefits for graduate students who work either part-time or full-time. The benefits that were consistent across the participant interviews ranged from feeling a sense of community to refining a skill set that allowed them to be better professionals. It is important to note that time management remains a challenge for involved students. However, if students manage their time strategically, benefits can come from these extracurricular experiences.

The findings are valid and trustworthy for three core reasons. First, the interview data was verified by each participant. Second, each participant’s lived experience was heard as its own lived experience as it was analyzed. This allowed for bracketing to occur. During the theme identification process, the interviews were analyzed across the board which allowed the themes
to emerge. Finally, the analysis and the data interpretation were sufficiently warranted by the data from each of the participant interviews.

Here, the analysis and findings of the research study have been presented. The next chapter will provide further discussion of the findings with respect to the current literature and theoretical framework. Furthermore, the next chapter will provide a conclusion and recommendations for future practice and research.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of working graduate students and the self-perceived benefits that came from their involvement in student organizations. This interpretative, phenomenological study looked at working graduate students enrolled in a Master of Science degree program at a large, private Ivy-League institution through the lens of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement. Much of the current literature seeks to understand the benefits of student involvement through the lens of an undergraduate experience. In contrast, this study aimed to focus on graduate students who worked at least part-time during their studies.

A qualitative IPA approach was chosen for this study because it explores the lived experiences of a group of individuals. Following data collection which is done by semi-formal interviews with individual participants, a hermeneutic interpretation approach is taken to make meaning of these lived experiences (Shaw, Burton, Xuereb, Gibson, & Lane, 2014). Utilizing Smith et al.’s (2009) step-by-step procedures for analyzing IPA data, the researcher was able to identify the below super-ordinate themes and their sub-themes (Table 2).

Table 2

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes Taken From Participant Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate themes:</th>
<th>Social benefits</th>
<th>Soft skill development</th>
<th>Time management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Role Conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the University and its Resources</td>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>Strategic Use of Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Legacy</td>
<td>Ability to Motivate</td>
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The above themes have been used as a guide for developing the findings of this study. This final chapter is organized by findings and explores how they are situated within the current literature.
The themes that will be discussed are: working, graduates students benefit socially from involvement, student involvement results in skill development for working, graduate students, and working, and graduate students face role conflict. Following a discussion of the findings, recommendations for future research and practice will be discussed.

**First Finding: Working Graduate Students Benefit Socially From Involvement**

As the participants reflected on their experiences of being involved while working and obtaining a graduate degree, it became evident that this population benefits socially from their involvement experiences. As the students shared their narratives, each participant described having felt a sense of community. This common thread was evident when the participants spoke about their experiences connecting with peers and faculty during their matriculation. Additionally, the participants had a better understanding of ABC University and the resources available to them. Through their involvement with clubs and organizations, the students became familiar with different departments and individuals who could assist them throughout their own experience. Lastly, the participants described feeling as though they had left a lasting impact on the institution and their peers and that their legacy stemmed directly from their experiences of being an involved student.

This study expands Berger and Milem’s (1999) findings which focused solely on an undergraduate student population. In their study of 718 first-year students at a highly selective, private, residential research university in the Southeast, the researchers found that undergraduate involvement strengthens perceptions of institutional and social support. They explained that this ultimately impacted persistence in a positive way. Furthermore, uninvolved students are less likely to perceive the institution and peers as supportive, are less likely to integrate into the institution, and as a result, are less likely to persist to graduation. The graduate participants in this study felt a strong sense of connection to their peers and the institution because of their
involvement. Additionally, the participants had positive perceptions of their peer connections, which ultimately led them to feel a strong sense of connection to the institution. As Berger and Milem (1999) explain, academic and social integration are important predictors of institutional commitment. Involvement has a significant effect on persistence because of its impact on social integration. The social integration became evident when the participants described being able to meet peers that were in different academic programs which often times can be hard in graduate schools. They described that their uninvolved friends rarely knew other students outside of their program and the involvement they participated in allowed them to expand their network.

Hardré & Pan’s (2017) study is consistent with these findings as well. They explained that graduate involvement supports relationship building with faculty, staff, and peers which ultimately impacts on how strongly graduate students will persist to graduation. Additionally, Gardner and Barker (2015) explained that student involvement helped graduate students to become integrated into their academic departments and disciplines. The participants explained that feeling a sense of a community was a positive outcome in that it made them feel a part of the institution. Their role as leaders allowed them to become a resource for their peers and they felt a sense of responsibility on behalf of the institution to assist when they could. Many of the participants described feeling such a sense of duty that they wanted to give back in as many ways possible. They felt it was their job to make the experience of other students better because of their role as a leader within the school.

Although persistence was not directly explored in this study, it is imperative to explain the direct correlation that exists between social integration and persistence. Tinto’s (1975) theory of dropout argues that a student’s integration into the social systems of a college is directly tied to their continuance at that institution. The theory explains that a student’s social integration leads to institutional commitment. As this study has found, graduate student involvement is
directly correlated with social gains, which ultimately impacts a student’s commitment level to the institution. Furthermore, this study expands Tinto’s theory in that it suggests that the undergraduate level is not the only level at which social integration becomes a direct outcome of involvement.

The participant’s involvement was directly tied to their ability to meet others. In Gardner and Barnes’ (2007) qualitative study of 10 doctoral students from various institutions, it became evident that student involvement was directly tied to developing a strong network. Student involvement allows graduate students to expand their network of influence which can be tied directly to their potential careers (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). These findings are consistent with the participant narratives which described using student involvement as a way to meet new people in different academic programs, ultimately expanding their professional networks. Specifically, the participants were each involved with ABC University’s Student Government. Astin (1984) found that students who are involved in student government become more involved with their peers and have greater satisfaction with their peer groups when compared to un-involved students. Building relationships with peers and faculty members are critical for graduate students and their ability to develop professionally (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). This network can be a source of friendship and intellectual and moral support for students which is often underestimated.

Overall, it should be understood that graduate student involvement is similar to undergraduate student involvement in that both assist students in building a social network and benefiting from these social aspects. For both cohorts, student involvement allows students to become socially integrated into their institutions which ultimately results in a stronger sense of connection and relationship building with peers and faculty.
Second Finding: Student Involvement Results in Skill Development for Working Graduate Students

As the students explained what they had learned from their leadership experiences, each participant described skills they were able to develop. All six participants referenced at least one skill they developed or refined because of their extracurricular involvement. The top three skills that were identified were communication, emotional intelligence, and the ability to motivate others. It is important to note that other skills were referenced but for brevity purposes, they were excluded from the data analysis section. Through their experiences, the participants described that their leadership positions required them to be challenged in various ways which, ultimately, allowed them to work on skills they would not necessarily learn in the classroom.

Much of the research that exists on student involvement has found a positive correlation between student involvement and cognitive development. Since soft skills are most frequently referred to as non-cognitive skills, the term “skill development” is used here to encompass the existing research with what this study has found. The findings extend the research as it relates to skill development to go beyond cognitive development and move into a non-cognitive domain.

In a qualitative study of 149 undergraduate students, Kuh (1995) found that out-of-classroom activities contributed to the valued outcomes of college. Specifically, the most practical skills were learned outside of the classroom through experiences that allowed students to interact with people from different groups and backgrounds (Kuh, 1995). Kuh explained that the involvement experiences presented students with personal and social challenges which encouraged them to develop personal and academic skills. As the participants in this study explained, their involvement experiences allowed them to learn how to communicate more effectively and/or with empathy. These skills are often not taught in the academic classroom and
it is imperative that we continue to promote out-of-classroom activities that support the developmental growth of students.

As the participants of this study described, their involvement experiences allowed them to interact with people they would have never met otherwise. Their roles in student clubs and organizations allowed them to meet people in different academic programs who may have had different interests and viewpoints. Various researchers have studied how undergraduate involvement has positively correlated with cognitive development (Astin, 1984; Laird et al., 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Much of the literature explains that undergraduate involvement allows students to be exposed to diverse points of views and perspectives which encourage students to look introspectively to reevaluate themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gellin, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) studied how college affects undergraduate students. In their book, they explained that there was significant evidence that showed social and co-curricular involvement having a unique role in a student’s cognitive development. Student interactions that confronted students with diverse viewpoints were the most salient in a positive impact on critical thinking, analytical skills, and postformal reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Gellin’s (2003) meta-analysis study found that undergraduate students who chose to get involved were exposed to diverse points of view and perspectives which allowed them to reevaluate themselves. This process contributed to gains in critical thinking. Additionally, Gellin (2003) found that involvement in student clubs and organizations led to critical thinking gains because it forced students to make a conscious effort to seek out groups that they were interested in, resulting in a high level of commitment. The level of commitment, along with feeling a sense of belonging, led to abilities associated with critical thinking. Similarly, Chickering and Gamson (1987) found that when students interact with peers, it often increases their active learning. The
diverse viewpoints of fellow peers pushed the students to introspectively consider their own values and beliefs, which can lead to gains in critical thinking and understanding (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The participants of this study explained that their involvement experiences resulted in their ability to develop emotional intelligence with their peers and helped them to learn how to communicate effectively in various situations. This study extends beyond these studies which focus primarily on undergraduate, cognitive gains as an outcome of student involvement. As this study moves into the non-cognitive domain, it becomes imperative that the importance of both are considered. Students must be encouraged and able to develop in multiple domains as it relates to personal and professional growth. This study aims to expand the current research to look beyond critical thinking and look towards various skill development opportunities.

To summarize, this study expands various literature that focuses solely on an undergraduate population as it relates to the development gains of involvement. This study shows evidence of graduate students being positively impacted by their involvement experiences due to their ability to develop and refine soft skills. Not only does involvement impact undergraduates, but it impacts graduate students and their development. Additionally, again, this study extends past just cognitive development and ventures into the non-cognitive development domain.

**Third Finding: Working, Graduate Students Face Role Conflict**

A common narrative throughout the study was that students’ time management became more difficult as the number of roles they had increased. In particular, students who have children described challenging scenarios that made it difficult for them to give one hundred percent effort to every part of their life. It is important to shed light on the impact that time has on the student experience for graduate students who work. Furthermore, it became evident
throughout the research that graduate students who work tend to have a strategic plan for how they use their time in a way that matters.

This study expands upon the research that currently exists regarding role conflict and viewing time as a zero-sum game. The participants consistently mentioned that they struggled to manage time spent at work, at home, at school, and within their leadership roles. The lived experiences showed evidence that this was a significant challenge that most students face. In a study of undergraduate students, Triventi (2014) found that working while enrolled in school distracts students from their school-work and reduces the time and commitment they can give to other academic goals. This study supports the findings that students simply cannot devote all of their time and energy to their school work and/or extracurriculars if they also work. Many of the participants described having a strict schedule with little time for a social life. School and work were their priority and ensuring they were being successful within those domains was evidence.

When the participants were asked to describe why they decided to get involved when they have such little time already, it always resulted back into their willingness to help other students and wanted to feel a sense of purpose. Researchers such as Wyland et al. (2015) and Anderson and Swazey (1998) documented that graduate students who work hold dual roles as both student and employee. Wyland et al.’s (2015) study found that the higher a student’s psychological involvement at school, the more likely it is that the student will be able to experience higher levels of school-work facilitation. The term school-work facilitation is described as to the extent to which an individual’s engagement in school contributes to their growth at work, or vice versa (Wyland et al., 2015). This school-work facilitation is also achieved when a student feels a high level of support from their faculty and peers. It is evident from this study, that student involvement does create a sense of psychological involvement and levels of support which ultimately results in school-work facilitation. Many of the students said
that their involved resulted in them learning new skills that helped them both at work and in school. However, many students struggle to maintain a balance between the various roles in order to see gains.

Goode (1960), who was one of the founding researchers of role conflict theory described that often individuals do not have enough time or energy to meet the obligations of the various aspects of their lives. He explained that there are three sources of role strain: role demands are often required at particular times and places, different obligations are required and/or contradictory, and each role typically demands several activities or responses. This study supports Goode’s 1960 theory, in that there was evidence throughout this study that supported his three sources of role strain. The students explained various experiences in which they had deliverables at home, work, and school causing them stress. Specifically, one of the participants described having to watch after his kids while his wife started a new job, he had to work on his capstone project, and also had to work on a consultant project at work. To say that it was realistic to give each aspect of this one student’s life one hundred percent of time and energy would be a fabrication. When one adds responsibilities of being a student leader, role strain is exacerbated. To future explore this concept, Anderson and Swazey (1998) performed a national study of doctoral students to seek reflections on their graduate experiences. The authors found that a quarter of the participants were struggling to satisfy the demands of various people. Additionally, over a third thought that the amount of work they had to complete interfered with how well they performed tasks. Finally, over 40 percent that their school work interfered with their personal (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). This study expands the research of Anderson and Swazey (1998) and Goode to Master of Science students who had similar sentiments to the participants studied in their research. The students explained that they felt that their experience as a working, involved, graduate students led them to have not enough time to spend with friends and family.
Additionally, they struggled to keep up with the various demands in their personal and professional lives.

Although this study focused on the benefits of student involvement, there was too much evidence of role conflict for it to be ignored. Time is of the essence for this working population and somehow, they still manage to make time to get involved. As students take on various roles at home, school, and work, it becomes increasingly challenging for them to be successful in each of these domains. However, because of the aforementioned evidence of gains that come from student involvement, there are various reasons why students might want to add a leadership position to their plate.

**Conclusion**

The research question guiding this study was, “What are the self-perceived benefits of student involvement for working, graduate students?” The answer to this question was discovered by listening to the way various students made meaning of their involvement experiences. Embedded in their life experiences were stories of a positive student experience that was both challenging and rewarding in various ways. As the students shared their narratives, they offered various examples of how they benefited from their experiences as an involved student but also shared challenges they faced working, graduate students.

Each of the above findings are supported by the current literature and studies available; however, due to the focus of this study being on working graduate students, little research was available to reference. For that reason, research on undergraduate students was utilized to support the findings of this study. For these six students, their involvement experiences provided them with social benefits as well as skill development and refinement. They struggled with time management and meeting the demands of the various aspects of their lives and responsibilities.
While students struggled to provide undivided attention to all aspects of their lives, they still benefited from being involved, working graduate students. Their experiences were filled with opportunities to interact with and learn from various stakeholders both internally and externally to the University. Additionally, their experiences allowed them to tie together all aspects of work and school. Their ability to build skills helped them grow, which ultimately made them better and more qualified professionals.

This research reinforced the notion that student involvement experiences at the graduate level matter and are important aspects of the student experience. These experiences support the overall growth and development of students. It is important to state that learning and growing does not stop when one graduates college. The evolution of an individual is never-ending as demonstrated by the data provided by our participants.

In conclusion, working graduate students do benefit from involvement experiences in student clubs and organization. While students may find it challenging to manage the various roles they hold, the participants in this study have managed to successfully maintain their responsibilities and benefit from their involvement. The next section offers recommendations for practice which are intended to support working graduate students through various extracurricular opportunities and to encourage the involvement of this population within student clubs and organizations.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Student involvement practices and theories have traditionally been built and studied for an undergraduate population. Graduate students, even those who work, look to university administrators to create programs that help them achieve their personal and professional goals. While the experiences of the students that participated in this study were situated within a large, private Ivy-League institution, findings may be useful in other graduate and professional school
settings to help advance graduate student education and the student experience. The intent of this section is to offer grounded and informed recommendations that can support the advancement of extracurricular experiences for a predominately working graduate student population.

The first recommendation for student affairs practitioners is to begin to socialize the importance of involvement for graduate students. There are considerable benefits to having involvement opportunities for all graduate students, including those that work. Student clubs and organizations help to provide valuable social and skill-based benefits that help to advance the purpose of graduate and professional graduate education. It is important that, as practitioners, we begin to stress the importance of involvement as early as admitted student days and new student orientation to educate students on the benefits of these opportunities.

The second recommendation is for student affairs practitioners to debunk the myth that student involvement is primarily for undergraduate students. As seen in this study, working graduate students enjoyed and benefited from being involved in student clubs and organizations. Oftentimes, students and various stakeholders connect the idea of student involvement to being undergraduate students because it has been a narrative that has been told time and time again. Practitioners can begin to share narratives of graduate students’ experiences with student involvement to show that there is value in graduate involvement experiences.

The third recommendation for practice would be for student affairs practitioners to maximize the skill development and social domains for working graduate students. Because there has traditionally been little to no research on the topic of graduate student involvement, practitioners have been forced to apply undergraduate best practices to their graduate student population. This study is evidence that there are various domains that benefit from involvement experiences that working graduate students were appreciative for. Practitioners should lean into the areas of skill development and social networking to expand on our current practices.
A fourth recommendation is that student practitioners should offer time management assistance as well as programs to reduce stress in various other roles that exist for working graduate students. Oftentimes, assumptions are made about graduate students because they have already navigated the stressors of undergraduate education and graduated. However, we know that graduate students come to our campuses having the manage expectations at home, work, and school. Student affairs practitioners should provide meaningful time management skill-building opportunities at the start of the graduate experience so the students are equipped with tactics to assist them in being successful in various domains of their life. Additionally, all student services should focus on an efficiency model that works to reduce the amount of time spent on arduous tasks that can often be completed by administrators. This will allow students to reduce the amount of time spent trying to navigate the university to complete simple tasks. The time saved can then be spent on extracurricular opportunities.

The fifth and final recommendation is that student affairs practitioners should ensure that all extracurricular opportunities have a career development twist. During this study, it became evident that the working graduate student population ultimately chose to get involved because it brought them closer to achieving their career potential. As described in the literature review section of this dissertation, graduate education has become more focused, applied, and industry-specific. Today’s graduate students care about career development and the more that student affairs practitioners can do to provide students with these opportunities, the better.

The above recommendations are easy wins for those student affairs professionals working closely with a graduate student population and more specifically with those students who work either part-time or full-time. The recommendations should be assessed and developed further so we can continue to expand the best practices that currently exist in the field of higher education.
Next Steps

As a student affairs practitioner, I have the unique opportunity to be a true scholar practitioner by implementing what I have learned through this scholarly research. The following section will outline specific actions that I can take as a practitioner to share the above recommendations of this research. In order to begin socializing the importance of involvement for graduate students, I will share the findings of this study with various members of senior leaders at my current institution. This can be done by presenting a summary of this study’s findings at faculty orientations, executive-level committee meetings, and all-school staff meetings. Furthermore, I will work diligently to present the findings at various professional conferences around the country. As a practitioner in my everyday work, I oversee various teams that assist with new student transition programs. I can begin to adjust the way we communicate the value extracurricular experiences bring to a student’s graduate education. There are a variety of opportunities for me to give presentations grounded in research to stress the importance of getting involved. I can also address student involvement during my new student orientation welcome remarks. Additionally, I will add to the admitted student checklist that after a student submits their deposit, they should begin to explore involvement opportunities available to them. Finally, I will establish an involvement fair during orientation where student clubs and organizations can be present and visible, making it known that these are experiences that are valued on campus.

As a practitioner, I will work to debunk the myth that student involvement is primarily for undergraduate students. I aim to do this by creating visual representations that reflect the narrative of involved graduate students. I will achieve this by creating a short, professional video clip as well as brochures that will be shared with various stakeholders including students, administrators, faculty, and senior university leadership.
In order to maximize on the skill development and social domains for working graduate students, I plan to take a few steps. First, I will emphasize the importance of social events to allow for cross-departmental networking. Oftentimes, graduate students are only left to meet and get to know the students within their own academic department. As this study shows, working graduate students appreciated the opportunity of networking with individuals who had different passions and interests as them. Second, I plan to establish a new programming concept within our student leader trainings. This concept will build on the skill development aspect and will assist students in advancing their development and refinement well before they step into their leadership roles. If we begin early, students may further develop these areas and become more well-rounded individuals. Finally, I plan to assist students in explaining and exploring further how their involvement experiences translate into real-world skills. Oftentimes, student leaders fail to translate how their involvement in various clubs and organizations have ultimately made them better professionals. I will work with students post-leadership to extract the skills they feel they have gained. Following this, I will work with them to practice speaking about these experiences in a mock interview setting.

In order to offer time management assistance as well as programs related to stress management, I plan to begin implementing the following steps immediately. First, I will work with the Advising team at my institution to move towards allowing students to opt-into manual course registration by advisors. This option will ultimately move the course registration responsibility from the student to the advisor, freeing up valuable time that can be spent elsewhere. Additionally, this will allow students to focus on the current term they are in without having to think about the next. Many graduate programs have course sequencing and a structured curriculum making it easy for advisors to predict the courses students will be required to complete next. Second, I will work with the Student Life team to create more efficient
extracurricular experiences. For example: how can we update our processes to ensure student leaders can complete their required tasks or responsibilities on the go? An approach could be to utilize technology in a savvier way. Programs like student leadership trainings can be moved to a podcast format so that students can learn policies and procedures on their commute to and from work or school. Another goal would be to utilize a finance mobile application that will assist student leaders in managing their budgets and expenses. This will allow students to take photos of receipts on the go and upload them to our cloud system. An administrator can then work on the processing behind the scenes, ultimately moving the responsibility from the student leader to the student life team.

Finally, I plan to ensure that career development is at the core of most, if not all, extracurricular opportunities for working graduate students. I plan to implement this recommendation by working specifically with the Student Life team at my current institution. The current model of programming is cross-disciplinary and focuses on a variety of disjointed programs with no true learning outcomes. The goal is to develop learning outcomes that focus on preparing our graduate students for industry. A new Student Life curriculum will focus on building out certification programs for various skill families (i.e. Supervision/Management, Communication for the Workplace). Additionally, the team will work collaboratively with the Career Development team to co-sponsor various programs and events. Finally, the Student Life team will develop a professional development fund. This fund will allow students to attend professional conferences and gain skills through leading professionals in their fields.

Implementing these recommendations will beneficial to not only our students, by the future of our institution. By maximizing opportunities that are effective for working graduate students, we provide a more welcoming and supportive community for our targeted student population.
**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the conclusions and recommendations for practice, there are several opportunities for future research that can be identified. As mentioned previously, much of the current literature that exists on student involvement is told through the lens of an undergraduate experience. It is imperative that researchers begin to study the country’s rapidly growing graduate population to ensure adequate and fulfilling student experiences for this cohort of students. This section will outline four key areas of future research that will expand the body of knowledge as it relates to working graduate students and student involvement.

The first recommendation for future research is in the area of graduate student involvement and retention. Various studies explore the positive correlation that exists between undergraduate student involvement and time to degree completion. Researchers can begin to explore whether these findings can be expanded to include a graduate student body. It would be important to explore the connection between a student’s commitment to their institution and if that has a direct connection to graduate school retention.

The second recommendation for future research is related to the types of involvement opportunities that are available to a graduate student population. For the purpose of this study, only student clubs and organizations were looked at. In the future, it will be important to look at opportunities such as interacting with faculty outside of the classroom, serving on research projects, living on-campus versus off-campus, internships, athletics, and Greek life. By looking at each of these opportunities and comparing their impact on the student experience, researchers may be able to pinpoint the exact opportunities that are most impactful for graduate students. This would assist in the development of a more tailored approach to improving the graduate student experience.
The third recommendation for future research looks at the comparison between off-campus work and on-campus work for graduate students. As described, the numbers of graduate students who work are rapidly increasing. It is imperative that we look at the impact of both locations of work to understand which could help improve the graduate student experience. For example, if the research were to show that on-campus work is more beneficial and impactful for graduate students, graduate schools may react to this information by creating additional graduate assistant or teaching assistant roles for this population. It is important to understand the root of why students choose to work on-campus or off-campus. The findings could greatly impact how practitioners recruit and market toward prospective students.

The last and final recommendation for future research looks at the age or professional experience differentiation between working graduate students to better understand the experiences of our students. This study chose to exclude age and professional experience from the participant criteria and looked at a variety of students at different points in their lives and professional careers. However, future research could inform practitioners as to how students experience their graduate education based on age or time in the workforce. It is important to know whether practitioners should create a one-size fits all model for all working graduate students or to tailor experiences based on a student’s age or level of professional experience in the workforce.

While this research has helped to create and expand awareness on the involvement experiences of working graduate students, it has underscored the need for future research. While little is known about this population, they are actively enrolling in colleges and universities around the United States and it is imperative that, as scholar-practitioners, we do our due diligence to make sure they are supported. Through a combined effort of looking at what research has been done at the undergraduate level and by creating new research that looks at this
growing population, higher education institutions can create a tailored and informed approach to graduate and professional education.
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https://doi.org/10.2307/1981920

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2014.03.006


https://doi.org/10.5367/ihe.2015.0254
Appendix A: IRB Approval Notification

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: October 29, 2018  IRB #: CPS18-09-11
Principal Investigator(s): Mounira Morris
                        Tiffany Onorato-Hughes
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Examining the Impact of Student Involvement for
                Working Graduate Students
Participating Sites: Columbia University permission in file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: OCTOBER 28, 2019

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other institution approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B: Email Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear {First Name},

My name is Tiffany, and I am the Executive Director of Student Engagement here at Columbia University’s School of Professional Studies. I am also a current doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. For my doctoral thesis, I am conducting research regarding the impact student involvement has on working graduate students. I would like to ask for your participation in this dissertation study.

If you are interested in participating, I will interview you via Zoom video conference for 45 minutes regarding your experience as a working graduate student who also holds a leadership position within a student organization. You will be asked to share information about how student involvement has impacted both your personal and professional life.

Attached is a consent form with information about the study and your participation. If you volunteer to be interviewed, I will also review the information with you verbally before the interview begins. Your participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this study please email me back at onorato.t@husky.neu.edu. All participants who complete the full interview process will receive a $10.00 Amazon gift card to thank them for their participation.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration –

Sincerely,

Tiffany Onorato-Hughes
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, MA

IRB# CPS18-09-11
Approved: 10/29/18
Expiration Date: 10/28/19
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Signed Informed Consent Document
Northeastern University, Doctor of Education Program

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Mounira Morris, Student Researcher, Tiffany Onorato-Hughes

Title of Project: Examining the Impact of Student Involvement for Working Graduate Students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you in detail. You may ask the researcher any questions about your involvement in this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to from the study person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign a statement of consent.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are an enrolled graduate student who works at least part-time and you hold a leadership position within a student organization.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to develop best practices that will provide working graduate students with meaningful engagement opportunities during graduate school.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two semi-structured interviewed that will last between 30 and 90 minutes. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your graduate student experience, why you decided to get involved in graduate student activities, and how you feel your involvement as impacted your personal and professional life.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed virtually via a video-conference platform, Zoom, at a time that is convenient for you. The initial interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes. About two weeks later, we will email you to schedule a follow-up interview that will take between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. This follow-up interview will also be conducted via video-conference.

Will there be any risk of discomfort to me?
There are limited risks associated with participating in this study. One of the researchers works at Columbia University so there may be some points in the interview where you may feel obligated to answer a certain way. We encourage you to answer the questions with 100% honesty.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There are no direct benefits for you. The information learned from this study could help to advance best practices as it relates to supporting working graduate students through their graduate education.

Who will see the information about me?
Only the primary and student researcher will have access to your confidential data. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being a part of this project.

IRB# CPS18-09-11
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The researcher will ensure the confidentiality of the participants by utilizing pseudonyms. All documents related to the interview will be protected in an encrypted password protection software program that is only accessible by the researcher.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tiffany Onorato-Hughes at onorato.t@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You may also contact Dr., the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be paid for your participation. You will, however, be given a $10 gift certificate to Amazon.com as soon as you complete the study in gratitude for the time you spent working with this researcher.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There are no costs associated with this study.

**I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH:**

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IRB# CPS18-09-11
Approved: 10/29/18
Expiration Date: 10/28/19
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University

Interviewee (Title and Name):

Interviewer: Tiffany Onorato-Hughes, Doctoral Student at Northeastern University

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do working, graduate students understand the impact of their involvement in student clubs and organizations on their personal and professional lives?

Part I: Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about being involved as a working, graduate student. My research project focuses on the experience of graduate students who work part-time or full-time but also hold leadership positions in student clubs/organizations. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into understanding the perceived benefits students receive from being involved. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can enhance extracurricular programs for graduate students and begin to serve those who work will obtaining a graduate degree.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1) Walk me through why you decided to enroll in a graduate degree program at Columbia University.
   a. PROMPT: Why do you want to study your specific major?
   b. PROMPT: What do you hope to do after you graduate?
2) Describe what you do in your professional career and what you do for a living.
   a. FOLLOW-UP: What does your day-to-day look like?
3) Tell me about your experience at Columbia University thus far.
   a. PROMPT: Explain to me how you would sum up your Columbia experience thus far.

Part 2: One of the things we are interested in learning about is why graduate students who work ultimately get involved. I would like to hear about your perspective/experience about the benefits of student involvement in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

THEME 1: BENEFITS OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

1) What clubs or organizations are you involved in?
   a. FOLLOW-UP: What positions do you hold within these organizations?
   b. FOLLOW-UP: What other ways are you involved at Columbia?
2) Can you tell me how being a student leader has impacted your Columbia experience thus far?
   a. PROMPT: Describe how being involved has positively or negatively impacted your experience.
3) What has been the best and most challenging aspects of being an involved student?
4) Tell me how being involved has contributed your professional career?
   a. PROMPT: Share with me how being involved has led to positive or negative outcomes on your job.
5) What are some of the soft skills you feel you have gained from being involved?
   a. Prompt: Soft skills may include: Communication, problem solving, time management
6) Describe to me the hard skills you feel you have gained from being involved?
   a. Prompt: Hard skills may include: web design, budget management, python, etc.
7) Why did you get involved?

THEME 2: IMPACT OF WORKING ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

8) Describe how you believe work has influenced your time as a graduate student.
   a. FOLLOW-UP: Describe how working has been helpful/unhelpful to you as a student.
9) What are the challenges that come with being a working, graduate student?
10) Can you explain why you chose to work while obtaining a graduate degree?
    a. PROMPT: Walk me through your decision when you decided to work and obtain a graduate degree at the same time.
11) How has being involved impacted your professional development?
12) What skills have you applied to your current job that you have gained from being involved?
13) Can you walk me through how you manage your time?
THEME 3: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE EXPERIENCE

14) Describe some of the key relationships you have made during your graduate program.
   a. FOLLOW-UP: Who have been some of the most influential people during your time here at SPS?
15) Describe to me how your experience as an undergraduate student is different from your current experience as a graduate student.
   a. FOLLOW-UP: What are some of the biggest differences between the two?
16) Reflect on your time as a graduate time thus far, describe some of the most prevalent challenges graduate students face.
17) What do you feel are the major differences between why you would get involved as a graduate student vs. as an undergraduate student?

Researcher will ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.