

EXPLORATORY PIECE

Supporting Graduate Students Through the Use of Graduate Student Organizations

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In the United States, graduate education has become necessary to maintain a stable economy (Pascale, 2018). According to Torpey and Watson (2014), jobs requiring a master's degree or higher represent the fastest growing employment opportunities and are expected to increase by 18% by the year 2022. Similarly, research suggests as many as 10% of management-level or higher jobs will require graduate training. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), as many as three million graduate students attend degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States. Despite this growing need for universities to produce graduate students, as many as 50% of graduate students leave prior to earning their degree (Nettles & Millet, 2006).

So, if the growing need is so apparent, why do graduate students struggle to persist? Research focused on graduate students suggests that these students are typically older, have families, and are full-time or part-time employees with unique factors affecting their success and educational outcomes (Onorato-Hughes, 2019). According to Onorato-Hughes, graduate students

are also expected to become creators of knowledge and “shift between types of learning that may seem more in line with the role of a practitioner rather than a traditional student” (p. 37). Nevertheless, graduate students are often shown to be more responsible for their own career paths rather than being guided by the education system (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). As the financial health and economic growth of the U.S. depends more and more on its work force attaining graduate degrees, so does support for graduate students and their diverse needs through enhancement of graduate experiences that promote engagement and degree completion (Onorato-Hughes, 2019).

One way in which graduate student success has been supported is through participation in graduate-led, program-specific, student organizations (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Although Gardner and Barnes (2007) suggest that while much has been done to examine influences of student involvement at the undergraduate level, little has been completed for graduate students (Onorato-Hughes, 2019). For example, student involvement in student organizations has been extensively researched as a factor contributing to academic and social success for undergraduate students (Astin, 1984; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Nguyen, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Research suggests that up to 80% of undergraduate students participate in at least one student-led organization, which correspondingly relates to positive aspects of academic and social outcomes including retention, satisfaction, career and leadership aspirations, self-efficacy, work performance, and persistence (Dugan, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Tinto, 1993). In this article, I suggest that the positive relationship found between academic success and undergraduate involvement in student organizations may be assumed for graduate students as well.

Although similar to undergraduate student organizations, graduate student organizations (GSO) can serve several functions to meet graduate students' diverse needs, ranging from advocating on behalf of graduate students, identifying issues that are important to graduate students, and ensuring that concerns of graduate students are addressed (Coulter et al., 2004). One way that GSOs support graduate student concerns is by acting as a liaison between students and faculty, facilitating proper representation of students' concerns. For example, Coulter et al. (2004) assessed

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graduate student's needs and recommended that organizations focus on professional development, orientation to graduate student life, and social activity. This research suggests that student organizations can be transformed into need-specific spaces that allow for the diverse needs of graduate students to be expressed and met. A similar study found that graduate student involvement and peer support can have a positive impact on school-work facilitation (Wyland et al., 2015). Specifically, Wyland et al. (2015) found that "classmate support, supervisor support, and co-worker support strengthened the relationship between psychological school involvement and school-work facilitation" (p. 181). This study suggests that a GSO can facilitate graduate students' development into work-ready professionals. Finally, Astin (1984) suggests that the more involved a student is, the greater amount of student learning and personal development will take place. With the implementation and research of GSOs, universities can seek to improve the likelihood of graduate student success and retention to prepare for our future economic needs.

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