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# Conceptualizing Student Affairs Graduate Preparation as Activity System(s)

**Graham F. Hunter** (University of Dayton)

*Graduate preparation programs serve as a primary site for training new student affairs practitioners. However, scholars perennially raise concerns about the effectiveness of such graduate training and the readiness of new student affairs practitioners. Alternative theoretical frameworks oriented toward student learning can offer new insight into training for the profession. Utilizing literature on student affairs graduate preparation and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this article offers a conceptual model of student affairs graduate preparation as sociocultural activity systems. This model maps dimensions of the coursework and fieldwork environments that graduate students navigate during their training and highlights the sociocultural contradictions that emerge within and between each of these environments. Finally, the article provides a discussion of how the conceptual model can guide future research on graduate training and strengthen student learning and development within training programs.*

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With a majority of entry-level student affairs positions requiring a master's degree in the field, graduate preparation programs serve as a gateway to full-time work and a primary site for developing foundational knowledge and skills (Hirschy et al., 2015; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). However, empirical work assessing the preparation and competence of recent graduates perennially raises concerns about the effectiveness of such graduate education. Whereas new practitioners generally possess high regard for their knowledge and skills, their supervisors and senior administrators offer more tempered appraisals of their abilities (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011). Often, these concerns center on recent graduates knowing about the work (i.e., possessing theoretical knowledge and desire to serve students) but falling short in knowing how to do the work (i.e., skills for transforming vision into reality; Cooper et al., 2016; Dickerson et al., 2011).

These concerns about preparation invite exploration of how new practitioners learn their craft and the environments in which such learning occurs. Since the 1990s, the profession centered its focus on postsecondary student learning and development (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996; Keeling, 2004, 2006). Corollary to that renewed focus was a call to examine the learning and development of student affairs practitioners, especially that of graduate students and new practitioners. Although the profession's gaze has remained steadfastly outward on students and their collegiate experiences, it has turned inward in more meager ways. Existing literature on the processes and structures of graduate training addresses isolated parts, such as particular courses (Perez II et al., 2017; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018), competency areas (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Pope & Mueller, 2005), and supervised practice experiences (Young, 2019).

Literature focused on student experiences and outcomes during graduate training largely exists within a framework of socialization, highlighting how students construct professional identity, adopt professional values, and navigate new organizational cultures and contexts (Hirschy et al., 2015; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Liddell et al., 2014; Perez, 2020; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Although more recent scholarship seeks to complicate graduate preparation as a socialization process (Perez, 2016, 2017), existing literature offers little theoretical diversity. Over-reliance on a particular framework or paradigm may limit the profession's ability to challenge assumptions and reconceive old problems in new ways (Lather, 2006). For example, consideration for the context in which graduate student socialization occurs focuses on institutional-level characteristics, such as type and size

(Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Thus, a socialization framework is less equipped to consider more granular dimensions of context such as the unique social and material resources available in a specific office or classroom and how interactions between multiple learning environments shape student experiences.

I leverage cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), a sociocultural learning perspective, as an alternate theoretical tradition for conceptualizing student affairs graduate preparation programs. CHAT frames learning as the process by which individuals transform themselves and their social environments through ongoing participation in goal-directed activities (Engeström, 1987). CHAT is an especially promising lens for conceptualizing student affairs graduate preparation in that it (1) accounts for the multiple learning environments in which students participate during their graduate training, (2) provides specific constructs for mapping learning environments, (3) resists additive, acontextual notions of learning that dominate other learning perspectives, and (4) explicitly names how broad cultural forces, including systems of inequality, shape the learning process. Beyond graduate training, CHAT has broad utility for student affairs, although it has been leveraged minimally in scholarship (Bondi, 2011). CHAT provides framing and language for making sense of complex learning environments and the potential challenges that emerge as students navigate these environments. Although this article addresses graduate preparation, student affairs scholars and practitioners can use a CHAT-oriented perspective to map and make sense of any number of curricular and cocurricular learning environments.

The objective of this article is to provide a CHAT-oriented conceptual model of student affairs graduate preparation. Such a model can help student affairs faculty members and practitioners better understand the learning environments that comprise graduate training, how students navigate these multiple environments, and how environments contribute to student learning. Individuals working closely with graduate students can use the model to guide advising and supervising conversations and plan professional development opportunities. More broadly, student affairs practitioners can use the model to consider how professional development exists at the intersection of multiple learning environments and to map how the unique sociocultural dimensions of their own institutions and offices shape professional activities. The following section details existing literature on student affairs graduate preparation. The subsequent section provides a more thorough overview of CHAT, in-

cluding its evolution and core theoretical constructs associated with it. Finally, I describe the conceptual model and discuss its implications for student affairs research and practice.

## Student Affairs Graduate Preparation

Professional standards for student affairs graduate preparation programs (e.g., Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2019) stress a dual model, a combination of coursework and fieldwork, and seek to make connections between the two. Beyond these standards, however, "there is no consistent approach to curriculum content, program pedagogies, or experiential foci" (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009, p. 95) across preparation programs. The *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) provide programs with common vision for what new practitioners need to know and be able to do as they transition into full-time employment, but no requirements exist for the extent to which programs need to consider the competencies and how the competencies should be incorporated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, scholars have sought to explore various dimensions of graduate preparation programs. In keeping with the dual model approach, I review existing literature on dimensions of coursework and dimensions of fieldwork. I also address literature on student experiences during graduate training and the challenges students face in transitioning to work. This literature helps inform the concept model's discussion on the learning environments that comprise graduate training and how students navigate these environments.

### Coursework

Scholarship on coursework in preparation programs predominantly focuses on the content of such coursework and the various professional values it communicates. Rogers (1991, 1992) illustrated how faculty members nurtured students' development of collaborative leadership through frequent opportunities for personal reflection and exposure to alternative views on leadership. In Young and Elfrink's (1991) study, faculty members cohered around the essential values of the profession and attempted to teach these values through formal (e.g., direct instruction) and informal (e.g., role modeling) means. Noting the increasing necessity for and emphasis on multicultural competence in postsecondary education, Flowers (2003) found a majority of preparation programs had established or were in the process of establishing a required diversity-focused course. Rogers and Love (2007a, 2007b) found students believed they should be prepared to handle issues of spirituality in their work, but faculty

members were hesitant about the appropriateness of discussing spirituality as part of preparation for the profession. Studying faculty members teaching student development theory courses, Harris (2020) illustrated how faculty members were socialized to and wrestled with the primacy of certain texts and theories as "foundational" to student affairs preparation.

Scholarship on how coursework and classroom experiences influence new practitioners' socialization to and preparation for the field offers mixed results. Liddell et al. (2014) found in-class experiences most influential in helping students become involved in professional associations, understand the value of self-evaluation, and model ethical practice. However, the study also reported recent program graduates generally perceived out-of-class experiences exerting greater influence on their professional identity than in-class experiences. Similarly, in Renn and Jessup-Anger's (2008) study, new professionals felt their formal coursework had little relevance to the demands of their current positions. Consideration for intersections of social identities in coursework and classroom experiences also surfaces tensions. Linder, Harris, Allen, and Hubain (2015) articulated how faculty members could validate and support graduate students of color but often fell short in implementing inclusive pedagogy. Shelton and Yao (2019) highlighted how preparation program curricula often lacked discussion on international students, leaving new practitioners disadvantaged for working in an increasingly globalized and internationalized field. Although coursework may be an important site for exposing students to particular content knowledge, coursework alone proved insufficient for preparing individuals to do student affairs work.

**Fieldwork**

A majority of preparation programs require some form of fieldwork experience as part of their curriculum (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). These paraprofessional experiences may take the form of graduate assistantships, internships, and credit-bearing practice. Existing scholarship illuminates the importance of paraprofessional experience in preparing graduate students for full-time student affairs work. In Renn and Jessup-Anger's (2008) study, "nearly all participants wrote about how assistantships, practicum placements, and internships were essential components in their preparation for full-time positions" (p. 329). Liddell et al. (2014) found out-of-classroom experiences, including fieldwork, helped students better navigate institutional culture and politics, expand their professional networks, and understand professional expectations. Similarly, Young (2019)

found supervised practice experiences essential to their perception of leadership and application of theory to practice. Much of this scholarship supports the assumption fieldwork exposes students, at least somewhat, to the demands of student affairs work.

A smaller yet growing body of literature seeks to complicate understandings of how fieldwork shapes new practitioners. In Grube, Cedarholm, Jones, and Dunn's (2005) study, participants noted how fieldwork exposed them to professionals who made significant personal sacrifices and dedicated inordinate amount of time to their work. More recently, Perez (2021) echoed similar concerns in noting how graduate student socialization processes privilege ideal worker norms while prompting students to participate in overwork and self-sacrifice. Lynch and Glass (2020) also found graduate students exposed to secondary traumatic stress during their assistantship duties. Fieldwork experiences may be powerful tools in helping emerging practitioners feel prepared for their careers, but they may also foster unhealthy professional expectations and dispositions.

**Student Experiences in Graduate Training**

Existing research has explored graduate student experiences during their training and how they make meaning of those experiences. Perez (2016) noted that graduate students regularly encounter surprising or unfamiliar experiences throughout their training in both coursework and fieldwork contexts, but that their unique sensemaking of these experiences relied upon their capacity for internal meaning making (i.e., self-authorship). Graduate students developed greater capacity for internal meaning making when faculty members and supervisors validated their internal voice (Perez, 2017). Research on graduate students of color (Harris & Linder, 2018; Kelley & Gaston Gayles, 2010; Linder & Winston Simmons, 2015) demonstrates how race and racism shape training experiences for students of color, in different ways based on their unique racial/ethnic identity, as they confront discrepancies between the espoused and enacted values of their programs, encounter microaggressions in the classroom and at work, and chart their professional path. Such literature highlights the importance of considering graduate students, and their learning, within their broader sociocultural contexts and the ways in which the unique dimensions of training environments affect student experiences and outcomes.

**Challenges Transitioning from Graduate Training to Work**

Existing scholarship highlights particular challenges that arise as new practitioners make this transition to full-time practice. Whereas graduate preparation provides a structured learning environment in which to expand and refine professional skills, new student affairs practitioners must take increasing responsibility for their own learning and professional development. As Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) demonstrated, new practitioners faced unexpected and unfamiliar challenges as they entered the workforce. However, these individuals struggled to maintain a learning orientation, which affected their ability to self-assess performance and plan their own professional development.

Scholars have also noted new student affairs practitioners are often challenged in reading and adapting to new organizational cultures (Cooper et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). New practitioners are often unsure of how to confront the ambiguity inherent in reading an institutional or departmental culture and discerning its often unspoken rules and expectations (Cilente et al., 2006). Furthermore, in coming to understand organizational values and priorities, new practitioners sometimes encounter incongruence with their own values and priorities. For example, Renn and Hodges (2007) found new practitioners desired to focus their energy on the process of student learning and development whereas their supervisors focused on measuring it. The challenges embedded both in transitioning to a new organizational environment and in responding to tensions that arise often generate feelings of discomfort and force new practitioners to question their fit within the particular institution or the profession.

Several scholars have raised questions regarding the degree to which student affairs practitioners graduate with the necessary practical skills to be successful in their new roles. In studies focused on both senior student affairs officers (Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004) and preparation program faculty members (Dickerson et al., 2011), participants were generally satisfied with the learning outcomes of preparation programs but identified major deficits in graduates' abilities regarding fiscal management, legal standards, and assessment. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found these sentiments echoed even in the perspectives of new practitioners, who identified budgeting, supervision, and assessment as deficiencies in their graduate training. Taken as a whole, these studies highlight the concern graduate preparation programs emphasize only particular kinds of competencies—namely those related to theoretical and content knowledge—at the expense of addressing

the practical administrative skills that facilitate day-to-day operations in a student affairs unit (Cooper et al., 2016). These studies also highlight potential mismatch in expectations between faculty members and fieldwork supervisors, who may assume the other party primarily responsible for training graduate students in these administrative skills.

## Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Scholars have described cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1987) as a collection of sensibilities regarding the nature of learning and the relationships between individuals and the environments they occupy (Roth et al., 2012). For example, some scholars have emphasized CHAT's utility in defining elements of learning environments, while others have emphasized its utility in naming how social, cultural, and historical inequities shape learning and learning environments (Roth & Lee, 2007; Roth et al., 2012). Despite these differences, CHAT scholars cohere around a perspective that "theorizes persons continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts that immediately problematizes knowledge as something discrete or acquired by individuals" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189).

Engeström (2001) first conceived the evolution of CHAT within three generations, and contemporary scholars working with CHAT have coalesced around this description of the theory's history. In the first generation, Vygotsky (1978) formulated the basic tenets of *mediated action* as a framework for human development. In the second generation, scholars such as Leontiev (1974) and Engeström (1987) expanded upon Vygotsky's ideas in fleshing out the dimensions of *object-oriented activity* and *activity systems*. In the third and current generation of CHAT, scholars (e.g., Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009) have turned their attention to *joint activity* and the interplay between multiple activity systems.

### Mediated Action

Vygotsky (1978) offered *mediated action* as a construct for explaining the process by which humans interact with artifacts, tools, and social others in an environment and how these interactions result in new meaning making and consciousness development. Scholars often depict the construct of *mediated action* in the form of a triangle. The *subject* refers to the individual(s) engaged in the activity. The *mediating artifact/tool* includes artifacts, social others, and prior knowledge that contribute to the individual's experiences within the activity. The *object* refers to the goal(s) of the activity. In representing these constructs within a triangle, Vygotsky (1978) sought to emphasize the influence each of the constructs has over the others. Rather

than relying on a dualistic stimulus-response perspective, mediated action assumes the various constructs involved in mediated action are mutually transforming.

**Activity Systems**

Engeström (1987) built upon existing work on mediated action and object-oriented activity by stressing that the environments in which such activity occurs possess social, cultural, and historical dimensions. These sociocultural conditions are central to understanding individuals, the tools and artifacts they utilize, the objects they pursue, and the transformations that occur within an activity system. Engeström's (1987) activity systems model is also represented in the form of a triangle. The top triangle—Vygotsky's original mediated action model—details the *subjects*, *tools*, and *objects* involved in the activity system. The *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor* constructs represent Engeström's expansion of Vygotsky's work and underscore the sociopolitical leanings of his model. *Rules* refer to the formal and informal regulations that may constrain or liberate the activity and provide subjects with guidance on how to pursue their objects and engage with social others. *Community* is the social group with which subjects identify as they engage in activities. *Division of labor* describes how tasks involved in activity are shared among the community. Each of the six constructs (Table 1) has the potential to provoke transformation in the other constructs.

Table 1. Constructs of the Activity System's Model

| Construct | Definition | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| **Subjects** | Individual learners or groups of learners | • Individual student<br>• Individual employee |
| **Tools** | Social and material artifacts subjects' access, use, and adapt | • Electronic technology (computers, e-books, software)<br>• Physical artifacts (classrooms, office space)<br>• Prior knowledge |
| **Objects** | Goals or motives that subjects pursue | • Formal course objectives<br>• Professional development goals |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Rules** | Formal and informal regulations that provide guidance on how to pursue objects and engage with social others | • Course policies and instructor expectations<br>• Employee contracts and policies<br>• Student code of conduct<br>• Unspoken norms and assumptions |
| **Community** | The social group with which subjects identify | • Other students<br>• Colleagues |
| **Division of Labor** | How tasks are shared amongst the community | • Formal job responsibilities<br>• Tasks delegated during group work or projects<br>• Student participation in classroom discussion and activities |

**Levels of Contradictions**

In order to better understand the transformation and innovation that occurs within activity systems, Engeström (2001) suggested focusing on the manifestation of contradictions. Such contradictions are normal in activity systems and may appear "as disturbances, dilemmas, and disruptions that cause discoordinations or deviations in activity" (Cross, 2011, p. 825). Engeström (1987, 2001) identified four levels of contradictions. Primary contradictions occur within one component of the activity system (e.g., subjects possess the same object but have different views on how to achieve that object). Secondary contradictions occur between components of the activity system (e.g., subjects disagree with the rules they must follow in pursuing an object). Tertiary contradictions manifest when the object or method for pursuing the object of another activity system is introduced to the central activity system (e.g., subjects are required to use new tool in pursuing an object). Quaternary contradictions emerge between the constructs of the central activity system and those of a neighboring activity system (e.g., between the rules of one activity system and the rules of another).

**Joint Activity Systems**

Third generation CHAT scholars have increasingly shifted their attention toward joint action. More recent scholars (e.g., Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009) have stressed activity systems do not occur in isolation but rather border, connect to, and interact with numerous other systems. Their work focuses on how mediated activity in one activity system extends beyond its initial borders and may create chain reactions of contradictions and

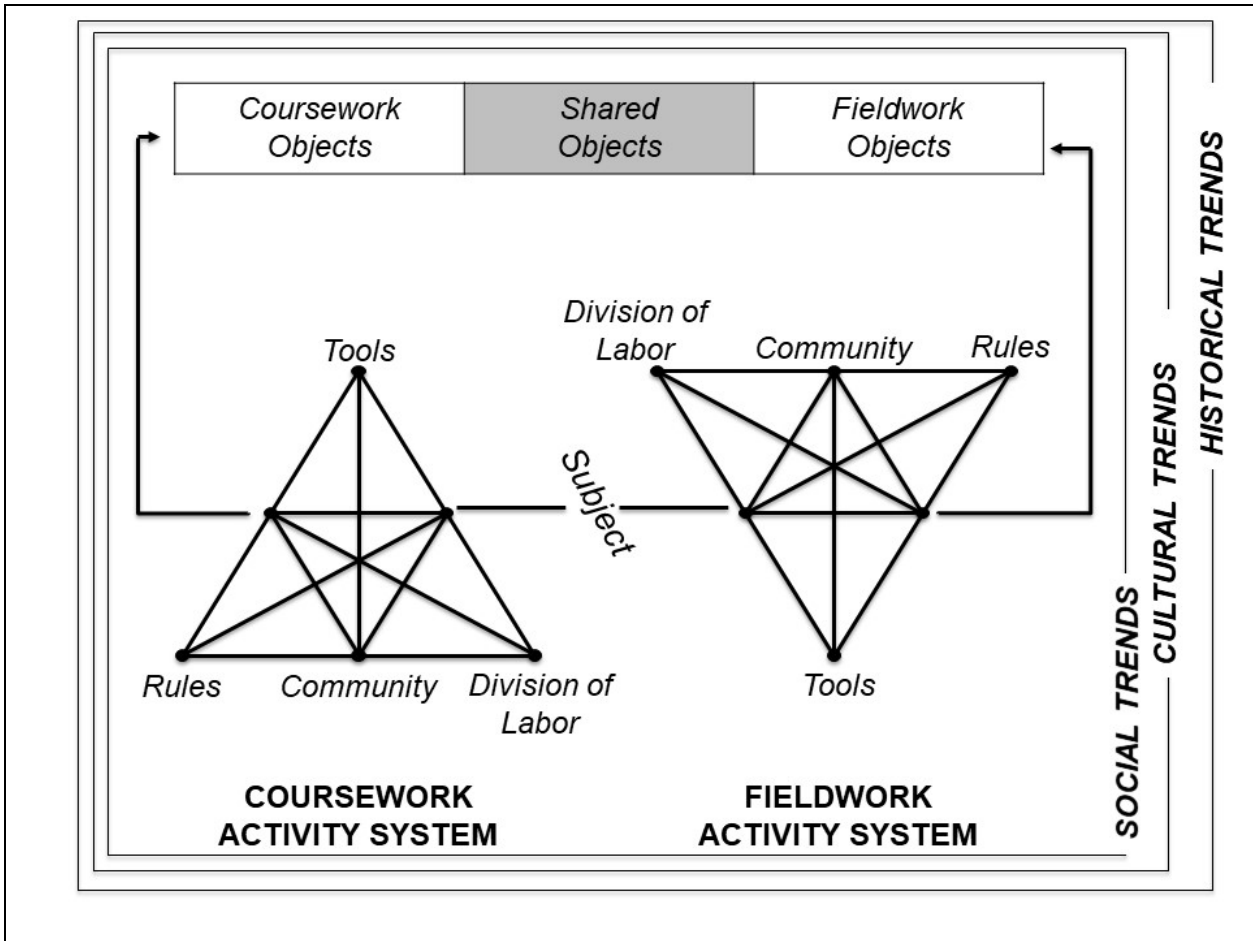
transformations across multiple systems (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009).

**Student Affairs Graduate Preparation as Activity System(s)**

The following conceptual model (Figure 1) incorporates existing scholarship on student affairs graduate preparation and CHAT. This model acknowledges the multiple and interconnected environments in which graduate students learn to do student affairs work. Because each of these learning environments contain distinct configurations of material artifacts, social others, and rules guiding individual and group behavior, each student participates in a unique graduate preparation experience. In order to fully understand the professional learning that occurs during graduate training, then, one must remain attuned to the interactions between individual students and their social and material realities. Furthermore, this model acknowledges graduate preparation as a collection of learning environments situated within and mediated by ever changing social, cultural, and historical trends.

This model frames coursework (e.g., academic courses and classroom environments) and fieldwork (e.g., assistantships, internships, full-time employment) as the central sites for students' professional learning during graduate preparation. Each of these sites comprises its own activity system, separate from and yet connected to the other. In exploring a CHAT perspective on graduate preparation, I leverage the major constructs of the activity systems model to describe relevant dimensions of each activity system. It is important to note that this model, even as it attempts to more complexly map out the dimensions of student affairs graduate preparation, in some ways simplifies the contexts in which graduate students learn and operate. Additional activity systems not present in this model, such as familial and friend groups or other professional experience outside of fieldwork, likely play a role in shaping what and how graduate students learn during their training. By understanding the components of each activity system, student affairs faculty members and practitioners are able to map the dual model of graduate training in greater detail. The model offers language for describing complex learning environments and offers guidance on the intersections between multiple learning environments that can be used to inform reflection, advising, and professional development work with graduate students and new professionals.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Student Affairs Graduate Preparation as Activity System(s)




**Subject**

The individual student serves as the *subject* of each activity system.

**Tools**

Students encounter and have access to unique sets of *tools* in pursuing certain activities. In fieldwork spaces, students may utilize textbooks, course syllabi, and online course management platforms in completing coursework-related activities. In fieldwork spaces, they may utilize departmental planning documents, training sessions, and material resources in completing fieldwork-related activities. Even the physical spaces of the respective learning environments represent tools unique to that activity system. The arrangement of a classroom space (rows versus circular seating, for example) can shape how students interact with other members of the learning community and how they execute classroom discussions and activities. Layout of a fieldwork office, including availability of technology, proximity to supervisor and colleagues, and degree of privacy,

can shape how students structure their work schedules and complete daily tasks.

**Community**

Each activity system includes a unique *community* of social others, such as instructors and peers in the coursework system and supervisors and colleagues in the fieldwork system. This construct is neutral in that it refers to social others who are simply present in the learning environment. Indeed, contradictions or tensions with community members (e.g., cohort-mates or a supervisor) may serve as catalyst for a student's professional learning and development.

**Rules**

Formal and informal *rules* guide each of the systems. In coursework environments, the instructor may implement certain rules (e.g., selecting readings and assignments, setting deadlines, enforcing institutional policies) and also create space for students to collaboratively design group norms (e.g., expectations for class participation and civility) and make decisions about their assignments. In fieldwork environments, federal, state, institutional, and departmental policies inform the scope and nature of work. In both settings, however, informal rules may play a powerful role in shaping how individuals navigate interpersonal relationships and engage in particular activities. For example, the particular content faculty members address in courses communicates a hidden curriculum of what knowledge and whose voice is deemed supposedly essential to the profession (Margolis, 2001). Through words and actions, fieldwork supervisors may communicate informal theories about the purpose of their work, the students with whom they work, and the utility of theory in informing practice (Jones & Abes, 2017).

**Division of Labor**

The particular rules and community of a learning environment influence the *division of labor* within that environment. For example, in a coursework system, the instructor designs a sequence of readings and tasks the student then completes. When working on collaborative coursework tasks, such as group project and presentations, students develop their own division of labor, either with formal support from the instructor or through more informal group development processes. Similarly, in a fieldwork context, the supervisor designs and/or oversees tasks the student completes. Division of labor may also embody principles of co-construction as students develop self-directed learning goals for fieldwork experiences and class assignments with guidance from faculty members and/or supervisors.

**Objects**

Students engage in activity within both systems as they pursue particular *objects,* or the goals of activity. Coursework and fieldwork activity systems involve both distinct and related objects. Coursework activities, as often stated in program curriculum and course syllabi, enable students to develop greater depth of theoretical knowledge and application of that knowledge to their practice. Fieldwork activities enable the student to practice skills within a real-world context but also serve to fulfill the functions of the unit for which the student works. The two activity systems share the common goal, however, of helping students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective student affairs practice.

**Broader Environmental Trends**

Graduate preparation programs exist within broader social, cultural, and historical trends. Professional standards (e.g., ACPA & NASPA, 2015; CAS, 2019) convey messages about what preparation programs should offer students and what sort of professionals students should aspire to be. Professional philosophy statements (e.g., American Council on Education [ACE], 1937, 1949; ACPA, 1996; ACPA, 2018; ACPA & NASPA, 2015) provide a shared narrative for the history of the field and its ongoing evolution. Student affairs divisions respond to shifting dynamics in the higher education landscape, such as increased demands to demonstrate accountability and changes in student demographics. More imperceptible yet extremely potent social forces—for example, the sociopolitical climate and systems of inequity such as racism and sexism—may shape students' experiences and especially mediate how students navigate the formal and informal rules and communities of their respective activity systems.

**Levels of Contradictions**

Contradictions, the cumulative tensions emerging within and between activity systems, serve as markers of potential transformation and innovation in the system(s) (Engeström, 2001). Since CHAT frames learning as the process by which individuals transform themselves and their environments, the contradictions that emerge in student affairs graduate preparation are crucial to an understanding of students' professional learning. As research (Harris & Linder, 2018; Perez, 2016, 2017; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008) suggests, graduate students face a number of unique challenges during their graduate training and into their professional careers. CHAT's framing of the four levels of contradictions offers insight into why these challenges occur and helps to name their root causes. Contradictions help us name

the particular challenges and sites of learning that may occur as students navigate both a single learning environment (i.e., a particular course or fieldwork site) and the interactions between environments (i.e., attempts to balance coursework and fieldwork requirements). Revisiting Engeström's (1987, 2001) four levels of contradictions, I conceptualize each level within a potential student affairs graduate preparation context (Table 2).

Table 2. Levels of Contradictions in Student Affairs Graduate Preparation

| **Contradiction Level** | **Description** | **Potential Manifestation in Graduate Preparation** |
|---|---|---|
| **Primary** | Occurs within one component of an activity system | Contradiction within the *rules* component of an activity system: Formal policies for supervision and reporting in the fieldwork site contradict with the unspoken, informal practices for supervision and reporting. For example, a graduate student may officially report to a particular full-time practitioner but in reality, receive little guidance from that person. Instead, they build a close mentoring relationship with another colleague in the office. |
| **Secondary** | Occurs between components of an activity system | Contradiction between the *tools* and *object* of an activity system: Readings and scholarship utilized in a particular course do not align with the academic program's guiding mission and goals. For example, whereas the program espouses emphasis on intercultural competence and critical perspectives on education, readings in the introductory student development theory course focus exclusively on dominant student populations and fail to interrogate alternative ways of conceptualizing human development (Abes, Jones, & Stewart, 2019). |
| **Tertiary** | Occurs when the object or tools for pursuing the object of one system is introduced to another system | Contradiction between the *tools* of one system and the *object* of another system: The institution requires a student's fieldwork office to adopt a new technology platform that does not align with the office's unique needs and purposes. For example, the Vice President for Student Affairs requires all division units to collect assessment data through a tool focused primarily on student satisfaction. This conflicts with the student activities office's strategic plan to shift away from student satisfaction and toward student learning. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Quaternary** | Occurs between the components of neighboring activity systems | Contradiction between *rules* of one system and the *rules* of another system: The academic program's expectations for a student differ from those of the student's fieldwork office. For example, a course instructor expects a student working in residence life to carefully prepare for class and read all assigned material. However, while preparing for class, the student receives an emergency call via the duty line that occupies them for the rest of the evening. The student cannot simultaneously satisfy academic and fieldwork expectations. |

### Implications for Research

This conceptual model can guide future empirical research on graduate preparation. Further research can utilize this CHAT-oriented framework to investigate how the distinct yet still interconnected nature of coursework and fieldwork environments shapes graduate student learning during their training. Such research might look broadly at the learning environments students navigate or might focus on specific elements of the activity systems model, such as the tools students access, use, and adapt in pursuing their professional goals or the levels of contradictions they encounter. In addition to student-focused scholarship, this model can also guide research focused on other actors such as faculty members and fieldwork supervisors. Such research may investigate these actors' roles in shaping learning environments, including the tools they make available, the rules they enforce, and the division of labor they establish. Ultimately, research on student affairs graduate preparation utilizing a sociocultural learning perspective may contribute to the existing body of literature by more explicitly focusing on the social, cultural, and physical environments in which graduate training occurs and how unique constellations of environments may interact with one another in shaping graduate students' professional practice.

### Implications for Practice

In conceptualizing graduate preparation through a sociocultural learning lens, this model provides several directions for strengthening preparation programs. First, faculty members and supervisors might use the model as a reflective mapping tool. Graduate students could identify the various aspects of their coursework and fieldwork learning environments using the activity systems constructs (tools, objects, rules, community, and division of labor) and reflect on potential contradictions emerging within and between learning environments. This initial

mapping could inform intentional conversations about how graduate students are navigating their training and how they are developing as student affairs practitioners. Although such conversations may spark dissonance for graduate students, guidance may help them make meaning of their experiences in a way that strengthens their internal voice and developmental capacity (Perez, 2017). For example, faculty members and supervisors may help graduate students develop a more internalized sense of professionalism, their own professional identity, and their unique professional development goals. They should stress that contradictions present within and across learning environments—and the dissonance they create—are not necessarily problematic but rather can help one identify sites of transformation and learning (Engeström, 2001). Graduate students might periodically revisit their maps to examine how they, their learning environments, and their goals may have changed over the course of their training.

Second, this conceptual model may help individuals who work closely with graduate students to see a "bigger picture" of graduate preparation. It highlights the unique balance, even tension, between the distinct yet interconnected nature of the coursework and fieldwork learning environments that comprise graduate training. Learning happens within each of the environments, primarily overseen by different individuals, but learning also happens across these environments as students apply theoretical knowledge to their daily fieldwork practice and use their lived experiences to enrich classroom engagement. Although scholars have stressed the importance of collaboration between faculty members and fieldwork supervisors, they have also noted their differing cultures, priorities, and perspectives (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Perez, 2017). Thus, this model may give faculty members and fieldwork supervisors more specific framing and language for understanding the "other side" and their relationship. For example, faculty members may consider how the formal and informal rules a graduate student encounters in their specific fieldwork placement shapes their response to profession-wide standards and values they may review for class. Fieldwork supervisors may consider how a graduate student's burgeoning exposure to student development theories influences their interactions with undergraduate student staff or advisees. Common language about the various facets of their work may foster more frequent, more intentional collaboration.

Third, using this model to foster the kind of collaboration noted above may address many of the training issues cited in cur-

rent literature. For example, discussion between faculty members and supervisors about the spoken and unspoken rules in coursework, fieldwork, and between those environments may foster new approaches for helping graduate students read and transition into new organizational cultures (Cooper et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Shared understanding about the tools available within coursework and specific fieldwork placements may assist faculty members and supervisors in helping graduate students to develop and maintain agency over their own professional development planning (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Shared understanding of available tools and the stated objects of each environment may also help faculty members and supervisors more intentionally create skill development experiences. For example, faculty members and supervisors may mutually embed small-scale assessment or budgeting outcomes and experiences within graduate assistantship duties in order to address those administrative deficiencies noted in previous research (Cooper et al., 2016; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004). Ultimately greater collaboration and shared language between faculty members and supervisors reinforces their mutual roles as practitioners in training future student affairs practitioners and the importance of both coursework and fieldwork as sites of learning.

Fourth, the conceptual model can be used to guide practice with not only graduate students, but also new practitioners recently transitioned out of their training programs. A CHAT-oriented perspective on student affairs graduate preparation stresses that learners and their goals exist within social, cultural, and historical legacies. These legacies follow and continue to exert influence on individuals as they move into new environments. Individuals working with new practitioners, then, should be aware of their graduate training environments and experiences. Supervisors could use the conceptual model to develop on-boarding protocols for new supervisees. For example, supervisors could use similar mapping activities described earlier to help new practitioners reflect on their graduate preparation and how dimensions of their graduate training environments may be similar and different from their new environments. Supervisors could also use the mapping activity to help new practitioners make sense of the dimensions of their new environments. Such activities could be especially helpful for new practitioners with collateral assignments (e.g., a hall director also serving as a conduct hearing officer) who work within and across multiple offices.

## Conclusion

Although the preparation and readiness of emerging student affairs practitioners has

long been the subject of professional and scholarly interest, previous studies have utilized a relatively narrow theoretical tradition to understand graduate students' experiences and how they learn to do student affairs work. In drawing upon tenets of CHAT, a sociocultural learning perspective, the conceptual model presented here provides additional richness and complexity in mapping the dimensions of the dual model (coursework and fieldwork) so often utilized in graduate preparation programs. This model distills coursework and fieldwork environments into corresponding constituent parts and highlights the connections between these environments. In doing so, the model provides specific language for breaking down and making sense of complex learning environments. Additionally, this model attunes us to sites of professional transformation and learning by focusing on various forms of sociocultural contradictions that emerge for graduate students within and across learning environments. By understanding these contradictions, graduate students and the educators who work closely with them gain greater insight into why these contradictions emerge and how they contribute to professional learning. Attention to the sociocultural environments that comprise student affairs training provides greater insight into graduate student professional learning and preparedness for the field.

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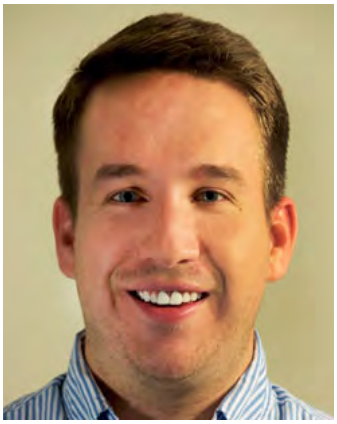

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