HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT AFFAIRS
MASTER’S STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR
PREPARATION FOR SCHOLARLY PRACTICE AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT:
A MIXED METHODS CASE STUDY

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Abstract
This mixed methods case study explored how graduate students in a higher education and student affairs (HESA) program perceive their preparation to engage in scholarly practice. The study provides insights for faculty members and administrators seeking to enhance current HESA graduate programs with a thesis-only option, and impart opportunities for students to engage in transformative work that is not confined to narrow definitions of scholarly practice. The findings of this study encourage HESA educators to identify high-impact praxes, develop individualized approaches to crafting innovative culminating research projects and experiences, and build effective program infrastructures that ensure graduate students in HESA programs are adequately prepared for their future professions.
Higher education and student affairs (HESA) preparation programs, based on recommendations from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), must strive to support students in their scholarly endeavors (CAS, 2019). To this point, graduate programs in the field of higher education should be shaped to nurture scholar-practitioners who can “balance and integrate ‘doing’ with ‘knowing’” (Kupo, 2014, p. 89). They must ensure students understand scholarship’s multidimensionality, breadth, and depth (Boyer, 1990; Kupo, 2014) and its application to practice. Throughout this manuscript, we refer to scholarly practice and define it as the connection of theory and experiential knowledge (e.g., conducting research, working in the field, presenting, being reflexive, engaging in discussions). If student affairs practice is void of integrating theory and practice, practitioners are likely to enter the profession un(der)prepared (Evans et al., 1998).

Given the increase in HESA programs over the last few decades (Calhoun et al., 2020; CAS, 2019; Tull & Kuk, 2012), it is necessary to investigate how these programs carve out pathways for graduate students to engage comprehensively in theoretical and practical preparation for their professional roles. Additionally, researchers need to investigate how students perceive their level of preparedness for their professional roles through their participation in HESA programs. This focus is especially important since critical examinations on HESA graduate programs are limited. As Perez (2016) suggested, there is a need to explore how HESA graduate programs can better support the success of future student affairs professionals by integrating more practical training into the theoretical components of their graduate curriculum. Additionally, examining specific instances of barriers to adequate professional preparation in HESA graduate programs can shed light on how these programs can better prepare students for their future careers (Perez, 2016). In response to these needs, we designed a case study to illuminate the experiences of graduate students in one HESA graduate preparation program. The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceived level of preparation for professional roles of final-year master’s students in an MA in Higher Education program and understand their engagement in scholarly practice throughout their program. Through this study, participants had an opportunity to evaluate their program and reflect on its impacts.

**Literature Review**

In the sections below, we bring to light the (mis)alignment between curriculum structure and the materialization of student preparation in the HESA profession. To do so thoroughly, we discuss efforts towards developing sustainable practices in the HESA field, focusing on assertions made by HESA stakeholders (e.g., CAS, College Student Educators International [ACPA], and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA]). We also delve into literature that expands our understandings of (a) the requirements versus the realities of several HESA master’s programs, (b) the expectations of new HESA master’s-level professionals in the field, and (c) the perceptions of new HESA professionals’ competency levels. Ultimately, this section underscores several key factors that HESA faculty and administrators should consider as they work towards developing high-impact master’s programs and competent HESA professionals who are prepared for scholarly practice.

**CAS Standards for HESA Master’s Preparation Programs**

HESA graduate preparation programs proliferate as the field continues to expand, ensuring that future HESA practitioners and leaders are prepared to meet the evolving expectations and needs of the profession (Freeman, 2012). In 1979, CAS, consisting of members from over 40 affiliated associations, was established and (re)developed
professional standards for the growing number of functional areas within the academy (CAS, 2019). These standards aid in “the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services,” ensuring the development of rigorous master’s programs that meet the needs of students (CAS, 2019, p. 1). For the functional area of “Master’s Level Higher Education and Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs,” in particular, CAS (2019) stipulated that program coordinators adhere to curriculum standards for master’s level HESA programs. Specifically, foundational content (e.g., various histories, philosophies, cultures, ethics, and research undergirding the profession), professional content (e.g., student development; impacts of HESA on various student populations; counseling and advising methods; organization, governance, and higher education administration; and assessment, evaluation, and research), and supervised practice (e.g., internships, graduate assistantships, and practicums) were noted as focus areas that must be included in a master’s degrees’ programs of study. However, the integration of these focus areas may look different across institutions due to varying program emphases and the individual and/or collective interests of students (CAS, 2019). Nevertheless, these standards help program coordinators cultivate high-impact educational environments for master’s students, enabling them to be proficient in the competency areas essential for their success in the HESA profession.

Although CAS standards are widely accepted and used as a means of maintaining standards in the HESA field (Calhoun et al., 2020; Young & Janosik, 2007), findings in 2020 showed that not all HESA master’s programs offer courses that align with CAS standards. For example, in Calhoun et al.’s (2020) study, HESA master’s programs were assessed against the six content areas outlined in the 2015 CAS standards and guidelines (i.e., history, student development, counseling and advising, organization and administration, research, and practicum; CAS, 2015). While the content areas have been reworded and further developed between 2015 and 2019, the six content areas mentioned above were still grounded in the three overarching categories noted in the 2019 standards (i.e., foundational content, professional content, supervised practice). An overwhelming majority of the 230 programs examined in Calhoun et al.’s (2020) study offered courses in research (90.9%), student development (85.3%), organization and administration (82.7%), and practicum (81.8%). In contrast, less than half of the programs evaluated offered courses in history (47.6%) and counseling and advising (40.7%). These findings are significant because they magnify a discrepancy between the CAS curriculum standards and the actualities of the courses being offered in HESA master’s programs. Furthermore, these results illuminate a clear delineation of content areas that HESA administrators perceive as integral in preparing master’s students for their professional careers. The same study also highlighted that course offerings tend to be impacted by credit requirements; programs with more credits often include a practical component, whereas those with fewer than 36 credits tend to sacrifice supervised practice—one of the overarching and important curriculum standards.

**Master’s Culminating Experiences**

CAS (2019) also stipulated that master’s level HESA programs include a culminating project that enables students to demonstrate their mastery of the various skills and concepts explored throughout their program. Examples of these culminating projects include: comprehensive exams, (e-)portfolios (Jaekel, 2020; Underwood & Austin, 2016; Young & Dean, 2015), thesis or independent research projects (Demb & Funk, 1999; Underwood & Austin, 2016; Young & Dean, 2015), supervised practice (Underwood & Austin, 2016; Young, 2019), and capstone experiences (Young & Dean, 2015). Of these academic pathways towards program completion, the thesis has traditionally been a requirement or a popular choice
for students completing their master’s degree. However, a recent study indicates a sharp decline in the number of programs requiring master’s students to complete a thesis project. Underwood and Austin (2016) compared culminating project requirements among HESA master’s programs in 2011 versus those in 2014. Based on their findings, half of the 61 HESA master’s programs reviewed in 2011 required students to complete a thesis/research project, whereas only 20% of the 55 programs reviewed in 2014 required a thesis/research project. While the thesis/research project is quickly falling out of favor, other culminating experiences are becoming more popular in master’s programs. In 2011, 59% of HESA master’s programs required supervised practice, whereas 67% required supervised practice in 2014, making supervised practice the culminating experience of choice among program coordinators (Underwood & Austin, 2016). Underwood and Austin also noted marginal growth in popularity for comprehensive exams (47% to 48% between 2011 and 2014) and portfolios (30% to 33% between 2011 and 2014) as requisites for a master’s degree. Despite the downturn in the implementation of theses in HESA programs, we reviewed literature on the use of theses to frame our examination of a compulsory thesis/research project for final-year HESA master’s students. Namely, we reviewed studies offering insight into students’ perceptions of their experiences with a thesis project.

One study uncovered factors contributing to students’ choosing to engage in the thesis process, such as: a desire to pursue a PhD, a need for a personal challenge, an interest in a topic, and/or a general preference for scholarly writing as opposed to taking an exam (Demb & Funk, 1999). Moreover, many students who participated in the study believed that the process and struggles of writing the thesis increased their self-efficacy and ability to conduct research (Demb & Funk, 1999). Similarly, master’s students who completed either a thesis or independent research project were found to have higher degrees of confidence in their abilities to carry out the various aspects of the research process than their counterparts who did not undertake a culminating project (Young & Dean, 2015). However, there is no notable difference in confidence levels between students who completed a thesis or independent research project and those who engage in other culminating experiences, except a capstone experience. Young and Dean (2015) were not able to substantiate the claims of Young and Janosik (2007), who posited that master’s students’ confidence levels in various areas of learning are directly impacted by their participation in the thesis process or other independent research projects. The studies reviewed in this section reveal potential benefits of the thesis experience. However, given the limited literature on HESA master’s theses in general, more research is needed to understand students’ readiness to take on the master’s thesis, the impacts of the master’s thesis, and how the master’s thesis prepares students for careers in student affairs. As educators learn more about students’ preparation for the thesis, as well as the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the thesis in preparing students for their careers, stakeholders are able to make better, more informed decisions about the fate of a master’s thesis in HESA programs.

**ACPA and NASPA’s Competency Areas for HESA Professionals**

In 2009, professionals from ACPA and NASPA established a joint task force to develop core competency areas for Student Affairs Educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). To develop these central standards, the task force members examined existing scholarship published by ACPA, NASPA, and CAS. The review and analysis of these documents culminated in the publication of the Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners in 2010. The initial 2010 manuscript proposed 10 competency areas: (a) Advising and Helping, (b) Ethical Professional Practice, (c) Personal Foundations, (d) History, Philosophy, and Values, (e) Assessment, Evaluation, and Research,
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(f) Law, Policy, and Governance, (g) Organizational and Human Resources, (h) Leadership, (i) Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and (j) Student Learning and Development (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). However, the second iteration of the competencies (i.e., Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators, 2015) contained some noticeable changes. First, “Ethical Professional Practice” and “Personal Foundations” were combined to create “Personal and Ethical Foundations.” Second, “Equity, Diversity and Inclusion” was changed to “Social Justice and Inclusion.” Third, “Advising and Helping” was changed to “Advising and Supporting.” Lastly, “Technology” was added to the list of competency areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), resulting in a revised list of the 10 competencies.

Given the applicability of these competency areas, ACPA and NASPA (2015) noted the next generation of HESA practitioner-scholars; emphasizing that employing these 10 competencies as a framework would improve both individual and programmatic assessment and development. Conducting a self-inventory using the 10 competency areas as a professional development guide advances the skill sets of HESA professionals. This self-inventory process allows HESA professionals to set individual goals, based on the widely-acknowledged competency areas, and establish actionable pathways (e.g., professional development opportunities, mentorship) towards achieving higher levels of proficiency (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Thus, most of the perceptions of the new professionals matched their supervisors’ perceptions, except writing for publication. Interestingly, new HESA professionals shared similar sentiments about their own shortcomings in other studies. HESA professionals claimed they are underprepared in the following areas: strategic planning (Waple, 2006), budgeting (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006), fiscal management (Waple, 2006), advising and supervision (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006), and writing for publication (Waple, 2006).
2008; Waple, 2006), assessment and evaluation (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Young & Janosik, 2007), navigating institutional politics (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), and technology proficiency (Waple, 2006).

Similarly, senior student affairs officers perceived that recent HESA graduates in their departments had limited skills in and understandings of certain areas, namely legal knowledge, strategic planning, finance and budgeting, campus politics, research and assessment, and proficient writing—areas that are currently deemed crucial to “successful practice” (Herdlein, 2004, p. 62). Last, several scholars have examined scant literature highlighting the following skills as primary areas for improvement among first-time HESA professionals: navigating institutional and campus politics, advising and supervision of staff, technological proficiency, assessment and evaluation (Cooper et al., 2016), strategic planning (Cooper et al., 2016; Herdlein et al., 2013), legal knowledge (Cooper et al., 2016; Herdlein et al., 2013), budgeting (Cooper et al., 2016; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein et al., 2013), and fiscal management (Cooper et al., 2016; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein et al., 2013). Given these documented skill deficiencies from the perspective of both experienced and entry-level HESA professionals, it is clear that new HESA practitioners are struggling in areas of significant importance in their profession.

Based on the findings of these studies, students are not entering the field with the skills necessary for successful navigation of the HESA profession. Ironically, HESA program coordinators have access to resources (e.g., CAS standards and ACPA/NASPA competencies) that enable them to develop master’s preparation programs that can sufficiently equip students to meet the expectations and needs of the HESA profession. At the same time, many HESA graduates are perceived as having substandard skills once in the field. Given this incongruity, deep inquiry into the disconnect between learning in HESA master’s preparation programs and doing in the professional field is needed. Such insight can help program coordinators make appropriate programmatic adjustments necessary for first-rate student preparation.

The HESA field needs scholar-practitioners who are competent and proficient in many areas, given the dynamic, multifaceted nature of the profession (Freeman, 2012; Roberts, 2012). Based on the disconnect between HESA master’s students’ preparation for scholarly practice and the overwhelmingly negative perceptions of new professionals’ competency levels and performance in the field (Cooper et al., 2016; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein et al., 2013; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007), more emphasis needs to be placed on the role HESA programs play in helping professionals develop and enhance their skills for the field. If left unresolved the shortcomings of new professionals may continue well into their careers (Calhoun et al., 2020).

**Conceptual Framework**

In this study, we use Boyer (1990) and Reason and Kimball (2012) as frameworks for understanding graduate students’ experiences in a HESA preparation program. Boyer (1990) proposed four elements of scholarship that transcend the traditional definitions of scholarly work: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. The scholarship of discovery embraces the necessity of amassing new knowledge through research and investigation. The scholarship of integration calls for a bridge of knowledge between multiple disciplines to create richer and more dynamic research. The scholarship of application focuses on the movement from theory to practice when what is learned is utilized and expanded through participation in academic service. Finally, the scholarship of teaching embraces the dimensionality of teaching; professionals must commit to a process of life-long learning, pedagogy development, and teaching (Boyer, 1990).

Reason and Kimball (2012) proposed a theory-to-practice model in which student affairs
practitioners move from understanding formal theories to applying them in their practice. The model begins with a formal theory—the generally shared, foundational understandings of student development theories—and moves to the institutional context, which focuses on how the institution’s environment, culture, and beliefs impact student support. In the third part of the cycle, student affairs practitioners connect formal theories with institutional context, intertwining their own ideologies, biases, and experiences to create informal theories. The final step in the cycle refers to practitioners’ taking their informal theories and applying them to their practice (Reason & Kimball, 2012). An integral part of this model is critical reflection. As student affairs practitioners translate theory to practice, Reason and Kimball (2012) implore critically thinking about how students’ work and practices impact their realities. In other words, critical reflexivity can reveal insightful changes in scholar-practitioners’ informal and formal theory, ensuring that harmful beliefs are not internalized or applied in practice.

Using Boyer’s (1990) work as an analytic tool, we investigated what graduate students in one HESA preparation program perceived as scholarly practice, as well as how their program facilitated their explorations of various types of scholarship. In tandem with Boyer’s (1990) reconsideration of scholarship, we utilized Reason and Kimball’s (2012) model of theory-to-practice to explore how graduate students use critical reflection to gain insight into their development as HESA practitioners in applying theory to practice. The model was also used to determine whether and how this graduate program promoted reflexivity among students as they learned about scholarly practice.

**Methods**

To thoroughly examine graduate students’ perceptions of their preparation for the student affairs profession in a specific HESA graduate program, we used a mixed-methods case study approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). Specifically, the case study design was an instrumental, holistic, single case (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018) bound by an individual HESA graduate program utilizing quantitative and qualitative sources. A mixed methods approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of student perceptions and experiences; that is, integrating qualitative data with quantitative survey results allowed the researchers to understand in greater depth how to improve preparation of HESA graduate students for scholarly practice.

Using a survey and individual interviews, we captured multiple aspects of this case in order to: (a) investigate final-year master’s students’ perceptions of their program experience and learning related to scholarly practice; (b) provide a holistic picture of students’ perceptions of their HESA program; and (c) identify strategies, practices, and support mechanisms that aid in preparation for scholarly practice. The research questions guiding the study include:

1. What are HESA graduate students’ perceptions of their preparedness for scholarly practice?
2. What are HESA graduate students’ perceptions of their experiences, engagements, and learning in the program?
3. How can HESA programs better prepare graduate students to become successful scholar-practitioners?

**Participants & Setting**

This case study was conducted at a public research university in the Northeast corridor of the United States in a 20-year-old Higher Education MA program requiring a mandatory thesis and completion of 36 credit hours. While courses in this program require papers as assignments that engage empirical work, prior to the thesis project, students are required to take only one introductory research methods course. Interestingly, this is the only research preparation students have before embarking on their research studies. At this case study site, over an academic year, the thesis
requires students to develop a study, obtain IRB approval, collect and analyze data, report findings, and discuss implications for research and practice. Currently, one full-time pre-tenured faculty member and several adjunct instructors teach in the program. The overwhelming majority of students in the program are current practitioners, while those who are not graduate and go on to full-time practitioner positions within higher education and student affairs.

All 29 master’s students who were in the final semester of the MA in Higher Education program were invited to participate; 23 students participated in the survey, resulting in a 79% response rate. Of the 23 participants, 13 volunteered to participate in individual interviews. Participants who opted into the qualitative portion of the study were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity.

**Sample Demographics**

The majority of students who participated in the study were women (91.30%, n=21), between the ages of 18 and 25 (65.22%, n= 15) and white (73.91%, n= 17), while more than half of the total number of participants (56.52%, n=13) were enrolled as full-time students. Almost half of the participants were employed part-time (47.83%, n=11), while fewer were working full-time (39.13%, n=9), and very few were not employed (13.04% n=3). Participants in this study were predominantly white and women-identified, and as such, considerations of these findings should be taken with that in mind.

**Data Collection Procedures**

During the spring semester, graduating HESA master’s students at this case site were sent a recruitment email explaining the purpose of the study with two consent forms for both strands. The survey instrument utilized for this study was designed by the research team and was administered through Qualtrics online. It was pilot-tested and developed based on an extensive review of the literature to target the research questions for this study (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). The survey was divided into four sections: (1) demographic and personal information (racial and ethnic identification, gender, age, enrollment and employment status, and internship placement); (2) closed-ended items addressing students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the MA program in developing their learning and the importance of each survey item to them personally; (3) closed-ended items focusing on professional development activities; (4) open-ended questions providing additional insight into students’ perceptions of their learning experiences in the program, support systems that fostered their research skills, and feedback to improve students’ research preparation during the program.

Once students completed the survey, they were prompted to voluntarily consent to participate in an interview at a later date. Participants were asked to share their contact information and schedule an interview session with one of the researchers to participate in an interview. The survey responses and contact information page were not linked to ensure participants remained anonymous.

We conducted 60-minute, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with participants via Zoom, a virtual video conferencing platform. At the start of each interview, students were briefed on the purpose of the study and were given an opportunity to consent to be recorded. Each researcher adhered to the interview protocol, asking all established questions and asking follow-up questions, if necessary, to allow for expansion and clarification of participants’ responses. Participants were able then to showcase deep and broad experiences.

**Data Analysis**

This study utilized the integrative strategy for mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative data analysis from the survey informed the qualitative data collection through the interview protocol. The thematic
analysis extracted from the interviews provided more detailed information and an in-depth understanding of the quantitative results from the survey. The thematic analysis provided a holistic view and rich understanding of students’ perceptions of their learning experiences, support systems, and challenges.

**Quantitative Analysis**

During the quantitative phase, descriptive statistics and exploratory data analysis were used to identify meaningful patterns in the data collected from the survey to answer the research questions. To answer the research questions about student perceptions of their preparedness and experiences in their graduate program, we calculated frequencies of responses for both perceptions of student learning and perceived importance. The response patterns for the extent of student learning and perceived importance were visually displayed to help present and summarize these survey data and explore the change in student engagement before and during the program. This exploratory analysis was then used to develop the qualitative interview protocol to expand on the results yielded from the quantitative analysis. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Gutterman & Fetters, 2018).

**Qualitative Analysis**

After downloading the interview transcripts using Zoom’s automated transcription feature, transcripts were revised by comparing them to their corresponding audio recordings, ensuring accuracy. Transcripts were then analyzed using a two-step process: open coding and axial coding. During open coding, each researcher used the comment feature of the electronic document to add a brief sentence summarizing the experiences shared by participants. Preliminary categories were created based on patterns we noticed during the first phase—open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Next, we grouped codes during axial coding based on common emergent themes across participants, discussed each code, and unanimously created appropriate categories. Once every code was categorized, we agreed on major concepts linking the categories and identified three final themes.

**Survey Findings**

Students identified the importance of each research skill/scholarly practice for them and the extent of their learning for each skill, using the three-ordered response levels (e.g., 1 = not important, 2 = important, and 3 = very important; 1 = I did not learn anything, 2 = I learned a fair amount, and 3 = I learned a great deal). Overall, students’ responses related to the effectiveness of the program in developing their research skills and scholarly practices indicate they gained or made progress on many expected research competencies, but not all (see Table 1).

In many cases, responses signify that students did not learn the skills at the level aligning with what they highly valued as necessary competencies to engage in scholarly practice (see Figure 1).

There was a noticeable difference in students’ self-reported engagement in professional development activities during the MA program compared to their engagement before they enrolled in the program (see Figure 2). For example, students reported much higher professional development engagement during their graduate program as it relates to conducting assessment activities/program evaluation (78% versus 17%), collecting research data for the decision-making processes in their professional practice (83% versus 13%), and publishing an article (57% versus 9%). However, students reported higher engagement volunteering at an event before joining the program (87%) compared to their engagement during the program (74%). The complete list is presented in Figure 2.

**Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Data**

Two open-ended questions were included in the survey to provide additional insight into students’ perceptions of certain aspects of the program that either positively or negatively impacted
their learning experiences and research preparation. These questions allowed the students to respond in their own words and address aspects of their learning that were not addressed in the closed-ended survey items. Thirteen students (78%) who participated in the survey responded to these questions. Thematic analysis was used to organize the data into distinct themes mainly focused on curriculum, faculty, and quality of the program.

Fifteen students (83%) highlighted the importance of offering an introductory research class during the first semester to provide “a stable foundation,” develop “useful writing skills,” and allow “for more individualized time to understand concepts and explore research topics.” Students explained that it is critical to build research skills from the first class and continue to develop those skills throughout the program. Since most graduate students have many responsibilities, offering additional support outside the research course to guide individual students was suggested. On the other hand, nine students (69%) emphasized the positive impact some faculty had on their learning experiences: exploring research skills in non-research courses, meeting with faculty outside of the classroom, and developing positive relationships with their thesis advisor. Finally, students identified the following additional aspects of the program fostering their research skills: providing an introduction to library resources, developing strong relationships with their classmates, and strengthening students’ critical analysis and group discussions. We were interested in probing more during the interviews about participant experiences with curriculum, faculty, and other components of the program perceived to be crucial to their success.

**Interview Findings**

The three themes from the interview data reveal what participants in this program felt is necessary to engage in scholarly practice: solid program infrastructure, empowering and dynamic pedagogical approaches, and redefinition of scholarship. In the subsections below, we explicate each theme to expand the understanding of this case.

**Solid Program Infrastructure**

Participants in the study spoke about the significance of having graduate programs with a solid infrastructure to facilitate a positive experience and improve persistence through graduation. These participants defined *solid program infrastructure* as having a strong curriculum with proper course sequencing, providing support systems both inside and outside of the program, and embodying a culture of transparency. Participants emphasized the importance of foundation classes to help them understand the fundamentals of engaging in scholarly practice. These foundation courses included instructional units on using library resources, understanding APA, being aware of the options and/or directions they could take in their culminating project, learning the mechanics of engaging in and conducting research, and developing their interest areas. One participant, Olivia, explained that because there was not much sequencing to her classes, she was at a disadvantage when she got to her research classes as she was immediately expected to know how to conduct a research study, write a thesis, and graduate, despite the program not laying a solid research foundation. Olivia explained, “many classes did not prepare me for what I was going to see in the research courses and all the work that was expected to be done.” Another participant, Clarissa, similarly noted a challenge in her program resulting from students being granted permission to take advanced classes before the required prerequisite.

These comments illustrate the importance of HESA graduate programs’ attention to curriculum design to ensure students have a solid foundation on which to build their culminating research project. These experiences underscore the need for programs to be proactive in anticipating the needs of their students and providing adequate and ap-
propriate supporting resources. As Clarissa pointed out, maintaining a well-organized and strategic course sequence for students is beneficial to their success in the program and in their careers as student affairs professionals.

Clearly, participants also understood the value and importance of having access to support systems in their programs and across the institution. Most felt that their success was tied to the support systems available. However, some participants felt unsure about the external resources available to them, such as the university writing center, and believed they would benefit more if they knew about them earlier. Beth posited “I didn’t even know the writing center existed until my second semester. I have been out of undergrad so long…I’m just used to solving problems on my own, I didn’t realize there are other resources out there to help me.” Beth highlights that the needs of students and/or practitioners returning to school must be considered proactively. Clarissa shared that several of her peers worked with her in the same campus office, and she considered them to be a “built-in support network.” However, she also felt like an “outlier when compared to full-time working professionals who did not have access to this built-in network.” These comments highlight the importance of providing support systems for students, regardless of their enrollment status.

In addition, participants expressed the need for transparent communication from faculty within their program as a tool for their success throughout graduate school. These comments were specifically connected to the completion of a culminating research project. Star stated,

> I had no idea what a thesis was, I did not come from a writing intensive undergraduate major so I’m like, ‘where was this [information] when I applied?’ Ultimately, there should have been more information highlighting the significance of providing clear application resources and comprehensive orientation programs to students for understanding the expectations of graduate study and, more specifically, a culminating thesis.

Likewise, Steve expressed wanting to know the expectations and details about the final culminating research experience early on during the application process. Steve outlined,

> I think the program should be more upfront about what they are offering, and explain how they are preparing you to be successful. There definitely should be more information about how the program is going to prepare you for more theory-based stuff or more practice-based. Because I knew [the basics], but other than that, I didn’t really know the specifics I was getting into.

Steve also longed for more flexibility in creating his own final project, which could have allowed him to infuse both theory and practice in more unique ways. Given these points, it is evident that transparent communication about specific areas of the program and curriculum is necessary for student success.

**Empowering and Dynamic Pedagogy**

Participants expressed that much of their success in their graduate program was attributed to the empowering and dynamic pedagogical approaches, allowing for relevant teaching and meaningful learning, embodied by the HESA program’s faculty who enacted inclusive and critical pedagogical strategies. Participants also highlighted elements of engaged and dynamic pedagogical approaches, including innovation, authenticity, and a deep desire to make learning enjoyable and applicable. For example, Jane emphasized how one of her professors planned specific classroom activities stimulating her learning, making dense theories easier to understand and translating theory-to-practice in tangible ways. She shared,

> My professor is always bringing in current events in higher education and facilitating an environment where we were connecting the dots. [The faculty member asks] ‘How’s this article relevant to what’s going on right now?’ She did group sessions where we would break out in groups and just make different connec-
tions with various activities. I love that because that’s the way I like to learn.

In addition, Clarissa brought attention to the fear and anxiety she felt as she chose her thesis topic. She explained that through her professor’s encouragement and support in helping her think through both her research and application of theory in innovative ways, she was able to conceptualize her thesis topic in a nuanced and complex way. “I think there was a lot of fear in choosing a thesis topic, worrying if I was going to do it wrong because it wasn’t similar to what everyone else did, but, my professor encouraged us to be different,” she shared. Alice also noted the authenticity embodied by some program faculty in the classroom who were role models for the professional she aspired to become. She explained,

I feel as if they are more than professors, they are also mentors and advocates for me. It breaks down the mold of the traditional student/professor power dynamic in a way, more of a collaborative style. I’m not directly always working with them on every class assignment, but each assignment or project, or class activity has slowly been advancing my skills for scholarly work.

From these findings, we learn that the pedagogical approaches that faculty utilize and embody are crucial to supporting engaged and innovative learning in the classroom and serve as a foundation for students to build creative ideas and think about theoretical connections to practice in nuanced ways.

Redefinition of Scholarship

Participants in this case also discussed the need to redefine scholarly practice in the HESA graduate program to honor its multiplicity and evolving range. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that graduate faculty and program coordinators should not pre-determine how students should engage in scholarly practice (i.e., requiring only a thesis). Rather, they should allow for various avenues (i.e., capstone project, program evaluation, portfolio, thesis, etc.) to encourage students to explore their specific areas of interest. Many participants felt a culminating project was necessary for their growth but agreed it is not the only avenue to prepare them for the profession. Participants pointed out that programs should prioritize preparing them adequately to engage in the research process and empower them with the tools to choose the format best suited for their interests and long-term professional goals. Alice explained engaging in scholarly practice can also take the form of “going to conferences or workshops,” not just the “actual heavy duty lifting of conducting a research study.” Brianna pointed out that her involvement incorporated a broad range of engagement, from “reading op-eds and scholarly articles to presenting at or attending conferences.” Both Alice and Brianna shed light on non-traditional ways of conceptualizing, promoting, and applying scholarly practice. Acknowledging and practicing these scholarly activities would help demystify the process of engaging in research.

Some participants were unsure of what constituted scholarly work because it was never explicitly explained to them Bevie noted,

I know scholarly work is like research, and publishing papers. I know that professors get published in a variety of ways. I don’t know if I could articulate the specifics of how you do it or really what opportunities there are to get published in ways that isn’t just your thesis.

Being unsure of the research process also impacts students and their future careers. For instance, while Jane is not necessarily interested in pursuing a doctorate in the future, certain areas spark her interest and would be intriguing to her if she was able to directly situate practice with scholarship, especially as it relates to her current and future roles as a HESA administrator. Jane expressed,

Research is not really as interesting to me, as being
able to have opportunities to put what we’re learning in the classroom to practice. One thing I absolutely love is a new course being offered about crisis management in higher education. I’m extremely interested in that area and can apply it directly to my job. Research, publications, not so much; it’s just not my wheelhouse.

Another participant, Steve, underscored the common misconceptions about scholarly practice and shared that he believed anyone could engage in it. Outlining the need for HESA programs to intentionally broaden the myopic and rigid understanding of scholarship that has persisted in the field since its inception, Steve mentioned, “I think there’s an idea [that] scholarship has to come from someone who is a tenured professor. But I think it can come from anyone. Especially when they are given the right resources.”

These findings illustrate that participants entered their graduate program with various interests, skills, and strengths. However, they desired additional exploration of their interests, whether they were interested in conducting traditional research or engaging in more non-traditional forms of research and scholarship. Ultimately, students want more choice about what kind of scholarly research they pursue at the master’s level.

**Discussion**

Using a mixed methods case study approach, the findings in this study present a holistic understanding of the student experience in one HESA graduate program. These findings also outline how students pursuing HESA degrees can be better prepared for and find support in engaging in multiple types of work. While this research was specific to one higher education graduate program, these findings may be transferable across similar programs that require only a thesis as a culminating project and can fuel helpful discourse on developing more successful HESA graduate preparation programs. In short, this study addressed the research questions around student perception of their career preparation, their graduate program, and strategies for HESA program improvement.

The findings in both the survey and interviews indicate that it is important to develop a program that is designed in a manner that allows students to expand their knowledge base, especially in curriculum offerings and course sequencing. While little attention has been paid to this issue in the literature, findings indicate that HESA programs should carefully create a program infrastructure that prioritizes teaching foundational skills (e.g., research skills) in preparation for more advanced classes. Ultimately, students who enroll in more advanced research classes without understanding the rudimentary requirements of the content area and/or mechanisms of graduate-level writing tend to experience stress, fear, anxiety, and confusion. Given these findings, there is a need for curriculum assessment and amelioration. Specifically, HESA master’s program coordinators can consider aligning their program curricula with CAS standards. In accordance with the vision of CAS (2019), this move would increase the likelihood of students being prepared to engage with the breadth and depth of scholarly practice both in their programs and later in their professional careers. On the other hand, HESA program coordinators can also consider engaging the ACPA and NASPA (2015) competencies as a starting point for programmatic evaluation and improvement. For example, evaluating the current (infra)structures of HESA programs against the competencies listed allows program faculty to create robust curricula which: (a) incorporates all the elements of the competency areas, (b) meets the needs of the students, and (c) helps to prepare students to meet the expectations of the field (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Ultimately, re-assessing the effectiveness of programs, paying particular attention to curriculum and culminating projects which are supposed to aid students in developing the necessary and desired skills needed to transition successfully into the professional field.

Additionally, classes should not solely be fo-
cused on dispensing theoretical knowledge; they should also serve as a vehicle that carries students to a place of comprehensive preparation and professional competency so they can function effectively in their professional roles. The program in this case study successfully provided several opportunities for students to engage in professional development activities, data-driven decision-making, and research opportunities with some faculty members. Although there appears to be some disconnect between the opportunities provided and the expectations for scholarly engagement in this program (specifically a focus on a highly theoretical culminating project required to graduate), the study’s findings can serve as a guide to further develop programs with similar requirements. Findings from this study contribute to the literature on HESA graduate programs by illustrating how a strong program infrastructure shapes a student’s experience and success in their graduate programs and professional career.

Further, this study affirms the importance of engaged pedagogy both inside and outside the classroom. It aligns with existing literature on the necessity of faculty members’ embodying pedagogical principles that center “the souls of students” (hooks, 1994, p.13). As noted in the literature and in the findings, faculty’s pedagogical approaches pave the way for developing empowering, motivating relationships with students; foster a sense of belonging and an ethic of care; and encourage innovative, praxis-oriented ways of thinking and being (Gay, 2013). When considering engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) and a model of theory to practice (Reason & Kimball, 2012), in particular, the integration of engaged pedagogy, reflective practice, and feedback loops actively support dynamic learning, criticality, and action-oriented praxis within educational settings. Together, these praxes are expected and proven to support student success and the overall development of practitioners.

Along with working towards CAS-compliant curricula, HESA master’s program faculty should bear in mind the importance of pedagogy in preparing future HESA professionals. Mainly, they should consider the teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices of faculty members in the program. For example, if educators honor the multidimensionality of scholarship in classroom spaces and within broader program structures, students are more likely to engage in and produce scholarship in many ways (Boyer, 1990; Kupo, 2014). Therefore, the paradigms held by HESA educators can impact the scope of scholarly practice that HESA students are privy to exploring within their programs. Therefore, HESA educators should ensure faculty members recruited for their programs embody inclusive, equitable, and affirming pedagogies that empower all students to learn and grow (CAS, 2019). Lastly, findings from this study speak to the importance of HESA graduate programs redefining scholarship and making way for more creative avenues that integrate theory and praxis. Participants in this study revealed they believe the definition of scholarship should be expanded and not limited to completing a traditional thesis. Participants indicated they had several interests for a culminating final project that incorporated theory, practice, and their lived experiences but were not given the support to pursue more practical avenues because of the thesis-only requirement. The theme of redefining scholarship aligns with Boyer’s (1990) work. It emphasizes the role graduate preparation programs play in expanding normative definitions of scholarship to include interdisciplinary, innovative, and teaching-oriented work that stimulates students’ curiosity. Ultimately, current and future practitioners with expanded notions of scholarship can contribute in innovative and myriad ways to the field of student affairs.

Implications

This study has implications for both research and practice in HESA preparation programs. First, researchers interested in contributing to the
discourse on the effectiveness of HESA programs should build on this study by examining multiple HESA programs across the United States, comparing and contrasting strategies and practices that contribute to the effective preparation of graduate students to create robust scholarship. Second, participants in the study were mostly full-time students, though this did not represent the program’s typical student demography. Future research examining how the experiences of full-time students with limited or no professional experience differ from those who are part-time with extensive professional experience would add to the body of literature on HESA graduate students and programs. Third, findings shed light on the value of redefining scholarship and designing programs that foster support for students who choose to pursue non-traditional avenues. Thus, future research should further examine the value of redefining different ways of knowing through research and the benefits of doing so for higher education practitioner-scholars.

Regarding practice, re-envisioning more innovative and dynamic HESA programs would require examining how theory to practice is engaged both inside and outside of the classroom. Examining the relationship of theory and practice is crucial to informing programmatic infrastructure, redesigning the curriculum, and supporting engaged pedagogical practices. If programs integrate and stay informed by both theory and current practice, the development of programmatic offerings, policies, procedures, and practices that further support student success will become normalized. HESA programs can then innovate and set students up for success—beyond the traditional academic definitions—and give them more options inside and outside of higher education.

Second, to engage students in classroom learning, faculty in HESA graduate programs should evaluate their pedagogical approaches through various assessment and evaluation processes. These can be formal (e.g., reviewing teaching evaluations or actively seeking student feedback) or informal (e.g., through conversations with colleagues and mentors). Findings from this study and others (e.g., Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011) suggest that students who enjoy and thrive under engaged pedagogical approaches often struggle in classrooms that incorporate more traditional approaches to teaching and learning as their exposure to engaged pedagogical approaches makes them less receptive to rigid teaching practices. Therefore, faculty are encouraged to engage in reflective processes to embrace transformation that can profoundly impact students’ success.

Finally, student affairs divisions can work with HESA programs to support graduate students’ culminating experiences while helping to inform practitioners in these divisions about current developmental theories and vice versa. While HESA programs provide great resources for learning, so do their institution’s work environments. As such, faculty and staff working in HESA programs should consider developing and sustaining collaborative relationships with their institution’s practitioners, so there is a common understanding about the goals and outcomes of the graduate program and a clear pathway to gaining skill sets (both practical and theoretical) through work experiences. Sustained open communication between student affairs divisions and HESA programs is crucial for reciprocal learning.

References


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Table 1

Research Skills: Perceived Importance and the Extent of Students Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Items</th>
<th>Extent of Students’ Learning</th>
<th>Perceived Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learned a Great Deal</td>
<td>Learned Fair Amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-Understand the scholarly literature</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Utilize electronic databases</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Write literature review</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Understanding of ethical practices</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-Critically examine research articles</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Understand the vocabulary of research</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Understand quant and qual methods</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Formulate research-able questions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-Evaluate research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-Understand statistics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Design a research study</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Employ data collection instruments</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-Conduct quantitative data analysis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Conduct qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-Conduct research projects</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Communicate results</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Relationship between theory &amp; practic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>73.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Use data for the decision-making</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>19-Apply theory to practice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-Use data to inform practice</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Conduct assessment/program evaluation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1

Students’ Perceptions Regarding the Importance of Research Skills and Their Self-reported Learning

- Conduct assessment/program eval: 70% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 87% Very Important/Important
- Use evaluation/data to inform practice: 87% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Apply theory to practice: 87% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Use data for the decision-making: 91% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 96% Very Important/Important
- Relationship between theory/practice: 96% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Communicate results: 65% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Conduct research projects: 96% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 96% Very Important/Important
- Conduct qualitative data analysis: 61% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 87% Very Important/Important
- Conduct quantitative data analysis: 65% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 87% Very Important/Important
- Employ data collection instruments: 65% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Design a research study: 52% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 78% Very Important/Important
- Understand statistics: 70% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Evaluate research: 70% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 96% Very Important/Important
- Formulate research-able questions: 7% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Understand quant and qual methods: 70% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Understand the vocabulary of research: 70% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Critically examine research articles: 87% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Understand of ethical practices: 83% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 87% Very Important/Important
- Write literature review: 87% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 91% Very Important/Important
- Utilize electronic databases: 96% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 96% Very Important/Important
- Understand the scholarly literature: 96% Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount, 96% Very Important/Important

Legend:
- Green: Learned a Great Deal/Learned Fair Amount
- Blue: Very Important/Important
**Figure 2**

*Students’ reported professional development engagement before and during the program*

![Bar chart showing student engagement before and during the program.](chart)