Influence of Undergraduate Student Affairs Coursework on Graduate School Transition and Professional Socialization

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ABSTRACT

The student affairs profession is currently undergoing challenging times related to the entry and retention of new professionals into the field. Considering new approaches to student affairs preparation may benefit the field by socializing professionals more purposefully while students obtain undergraduate leadership experience. Providing opportunities for undergraduate students to formally explore and experience student affairs as a potential career through coursework allows them to consider their future as student affairs professionals during their formative career development years. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to understand the role of undergraduate student affairs coursework (UGSAC) on the process of student affairs professionals' socialization based on Weidman et al.’s (2001) professional socialization framework. The findings from this study indicate that socialization into the profession of student affairs, which has largely been documented as happening solely at the graduate program level, is occurring in meaningful ways in UGSAC. The themes focus on the development of foundational knowledge, gaining confidence in graduate course environments, and functional area exploration in UGSAC. Recommendations for research and practice are presented for institutions considering the implementation of UGSAC.

Keywords: student affairs; undergraduate coursework; transition; professional socialization

GIVEN CONCERNS AROUND ATTRITION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS (TULL, 2006), WHICH WERE exacerbated by the departure of staff during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Tomac, 2021), understanding new ways to successfully recruit, retain, and socialize student affairs professionals is necessary to maintain the student affairs workforce. The student affairs profession is currently undergoing challenging times related to the entry and retention of new professionals into the field (NASPA, 2022). The profession currently focuses student affairs preparation through graduate preparation, however, providing opportunities for undergraduate students to formally explore and experience student affairs as a potential career through coursework allows them to
consider their future as student affairs professionals during their formative career development years (Sanford, 1966).

Student affairs has been deemed a “hidden profession” (Richmond & Sherman, 1991) because many professionals are not exposed to the field of student affairs until their undergraduate experience as they begin to interact with student affairs professionals through their roles as student leaders (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006; Tull et al., 2009). Because of this later initial exposure to student affairs as a career and limited undergraduate student affairs formal academic preparation, student affairs educators often begin college with a different professional aspiration and later develop their desire to pursue a student affairs career after a commitment to student success is developed in the collegiate environment. Connecting undergraduate students with the student affairs profession earlier in their career development process could enhance their preparation and commitment to the field.

Although student affairs professional associations recognize the value of introducing undergraduate students to the field through ACPA’s NextGen Institute and NASPA’s Undergraduate Fellows Program, there has not been a concerted effort to create structure for formal curricular preparation at the undergraduate level. However, recent undergraduate student affairs curricular development has begun to change the trajectory of identifying student affairs as a strategic career option. Over the past decade, the preparation of student affairs professionals has transitioned from strictly graduate coursework to a growing trend around offering undergraduate student affairs coursework (UGSAC) packaged as stand-alone electives, minors, certificates, or concentrations within existing baccalaureate programs. With approximately ten options across the U.S. (e.g., Bucknell University, the Ohio State University, and the University of Colorado Colorado Springs), UGSAC introduces undergraduate students to the student affairs profession in a formal way instead of relying on the common approach of exposure through undergraduate student leadership roles (Stroller, 2015; Tull et al., 2009). Professional mentors also often serve as important influences in students’ desire to pursue a career in student affairs, but these mentorship experiences also occur in informal ways (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006) which may lead to inequitable access to learning about the field of student affairs as a viable career opportunity.

At the time of the aforementioned studies, however, formal UGSAC was not established and thus could not be attributed to professionals’ decision to enter student affairs. Because of the importance of exposure to career opportunities during formative undergraduate collegiate years (Sanford, 1966), exploration into the influence of UGSAC can provide an understanding of the motivations to pursue student affairs. Learning how UGSAC influenced students to pursue a student affairs career after college and how it influences their continued roles and growth in the profession remains unknown.

As a new and growing opportunity to educate students earlier in their career-decision making process about the field of student affairs, the one extant publication that we identified in our review of literature about UGSAC examined the impact of one “careers in student affairs” undergraduate course (McKenzie et al., 2017). McKenzie et al. (2017) found that students who completed the course reported that the course content was a helpful entry point to the field. For those who eventually entered graduate school or pursued a career in student affairs, the careers in student affairs course assisted in their socialization to the profession (McKenzie et al., 2017). Although this study provided an important foundation into the further exploration of UGSAC, it
only explored the impact of one course. No one has explored the impact of a similar course or a series of similar courses.

Our aim was to begin filling this gap in the literature and better understand the impact of UGSAC on both the graduate school transition and professional socialization of students who ultimately pursue careers in student affairs. To that end, we designed a qualitative study to answer the following research questions:

1) How does UGSAC contribute to students’ transitions into student affairs graduate preparation programs?
2) How does UGSAC contribute to socialization into the profession?

This research is timely as other institutions consider whether to implement UGSAC and how it can support the sustainability of the student affairs profession broadly.

Review of the Literature

The main texts focusing on socialization into the field of student affairs were written with the assumption that formal preparation for a student affairs career begins in graduate school (Amey & Reesor, 2015; Holzweiss & Parrott, 2017; Tull et al., 2009). The growth of UGSAC requires us to consider how UGSAC contributes to the socialization process.

Transitioning into Graduate School

Research about how UGSAC prepares students for graduate work in student affairs is absent from the literature. Prior scholarship that focused on the transition from student affairs graduate preparation programs to full-time employment found that new professionals had difficulty managing multiple roles, adapting to their new professional environments, and creating a professional identity (Gansemers-Topf et al., 2006; Liddell et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). These findings, particularly findings about professional identity development, alert us to the importance of professional socialization (Liddell et al., 2014).

Students’ transition from undergraduate to graduate education in a professional field, such as student affairs, can be the first socialization experiences for new professionals (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Perez, 2016). The transition involves the process of learning new roles, environments, expectations, and relationships (Goodman et al., 2006). Based on literature from other professional fields, we know that undergraduate students are prepared for graduate school through formal, curricular approaches that provide an academic foundation (Perez et al., 2018). Graduate school preparation also occurs through mentorship with faculty and current graduate students in their discipline (Kiersma et al., 2012). When students are exposed to foundational content prior to their graduate program, they can apply their graduate learning more quickly and at a higher level of integration (Perez et al., 2018).

Some researchers have explored how graduate students made sense of their transition to their student affairs graduate programs (Perez, 2016). The goal of Perez’s (2016) research was to identify issues during the preparation experience and address them early to prevent causes of early departure from the field (Perez, 2016) that had been previously documented in the literature (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). The findings revealed the importance of being attentive to “students’ developmental capacities for self-authorship” during the transition to graduate school (Perez, 2016, p. 775). Perez’s (2016) work extended the professional socialization research in student affairs to the earlier stage of graduate school transition as a pivotal point in socialization. Our study expands the literature even earlier by exploring the influence of UGSAC on professional socialization.
Influence of Undergraduate Student Affairs

Professional Socialization in Student Affairs
Professional socialization occurs when formal education is part of the socialization process and when specific educational requirements and experiences are part of the career preparation process. Broadly, socialization is the process by which individuals adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge to be part of a specific group (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Within broad socialization, professional socialization is when individuals adapt “externally, in the requirements of the specific career role, and internally, in the subjective self-conceptualization associated with that role” (McGowen & Hart, 1990, p. 118). For professional positions requiring specific educational training, professional socialization occurs through the educational setting (Weidman et al., 2001). For student affairs professionals, the out of classroom practical experiences are particularly influential in their socialization (Liddell et al., 2014) as well as their involvement in professional associations (Duran & Allen, 2020).

Historically, the standard approach to professional socialization of student affairs professionals has been, and still primarily is, through graduate student affairs preparation programs (Amey & Reesor, 2015; Perez, 2016). Prior to the development and implementation of approximately ten campuses offering UGSAC across the U.S. over the past decade, graduate preparation programs were considered the initial experience of anticipatory socialization as students prepare for their role change to student affairs professionals (Young & Elfrink, 1991). Prior literature has recognized the differing socialization experiences for professionals based upon the institutional type of their professional position (Hirt, 2009). For example, for student affairs professionals in the community college setting, Hornak et al. (2016) set forth recommendations for graduate preparation programs to recognize and prepare emerging practitioners for the different socialization experiences needed to be successful community college student affairs professionals. The professional socialization framework (Weidman et al., 2001) provides a lens through which to explore the experiences of students in UGSAC to understand how this emerging approach can contribute to student affairs preparation.

Theoretical Framework: Professional Socialization
Professional socialization provides a framework for understanding the influence of UGSAC on future student affairs educators and was utilized in this study to inform the research design and data analysis. Prior to UGSAC, student affairs professionals received formal, academic training through student affairs graduate programs to contribute to their professional socialization whereby “individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. iii). Several scholars have used Weidman et al.’s (2001) model in prescriptive and adaptive ways to examine the professional socialization of student affairs professionals (Duran & Allen, 2020; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006; Liddell et al., 2014). For example, Twale et al. (2016) adapted Weidman et al.’s (2001) framework to include students’ diverse identities. This adapted framework places higher education institutions’ culture and socialization processes at the center while including students’ predispositions, engagement with professional associations, and influences from social connections beyond higher education in the outcomes of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of early career professionals (Twale et al. 2016).

There are four stages in Weidman et al.’s (2001) model: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. As students begin to consider student affairs as a professional area of interest, they gain an initial understanding of the expectations of the profession (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). In terms of graduate school socialization, anticipatory socialization includes the time when
students begin to learn content knowledge (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). The formal stage involves graduate students receiving formal instruction from faculty members, supervisors, and seasoned peers about the field of student affairs. Many graduate students work in graduate assistantship positions or full-time roles in student affairs, which allows them to practice their knowledge and begin to develop their professional identity (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). The third stage, informal, represents the time in graduate school socialization whereby students develop social groups with peers and begin to use those networks as sources of information and support in their professional development. During this stage, graduate students begin to realize flexibility in the work and see themselves more as professionals than as students (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). Finally, in the personal stage, graduate students internalize their role and experience transformation from their former ways of being to their newly adopted ones (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). Additionally, students understand the role of graduate education as part of their professional growth process and not the end goal by realizing the need for continued learning and development to achieve their goals (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). As graduate students progress through these stages, “one of the most important outcomes of professional socialization is an evolving professional identity” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 19).

Although Weidman et al.’s (2001) model was originally conceptualized for graduate student professional socialization, we believe that it serves as a useful framework for us to meet the purpose of our study which was to understand how UGSAC contributes to the professional socialization of graduate students and new student affairs professionals. Because we required participants to have entered a student affairs graduate program, there was indication that their experiences in UGSAC influenced their ultimate decision to commit to the student affairs profession. Our study was guided by Weidman et al.’s (2001) four-stage socialization framework as it informed our research design, data analysis, and theme development.

**Methods**

Due to the limited exploration of the scope of UGSAC as well as the dearth of literature focused on the influence of the course content on undergraduate students, we deployed a constructivist approach in designing our study (Crotty, 1998). The social construction of knowledge in constructivism is centered throughout the research process. The goal of constructivist research is to understand the lived experience of the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Schwandt, 2000), which may lead to reporting differences in the experiences as individual realities are constructed. We aimed to understand the multiple perspectives of current student affairs professionals whose professional socialization began during their time enrolled in some form of UGSAC to answer the following research questions:

1. How does UGSAC contribute to students’ transitions into student affairs graduate preparation programs?
2. How does UGSAC contribute to socialization into the profession?

**Data Collection**

We relied on standard qualitative research methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants who met the following eligibility criteria:

1. Completed two or more undergraduate student affairs courses at a four-year institution in the U.S.
2. Matriculated into or graduated from a master’s degree program in student affairs
3. If graduated from their master’s degree program in student affairs, participants must have been within three years of completion.
Participants were recruited via two rounds of email outreach at institutions with known UGSAC, emails to a listserv of student affairs graduate preparation program faculty (CSP-Talk), posts on the Future Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page, and posts on the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page. From that outreach, we received seven interested participants, of which six completed the entire data collection process.

**Interview Structure**

We gathered data for this exploratory qualitative study through one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews. Two interviews were conducted with six of the seven participants (one participant engaged in only the first interview) and recorded using a video-conferencing platform. Using a semi-structured, 18-question protocol, we explored participants’ UGSAC experiences and subsequent commitment to the student affairs field. The interview protocol was reflective of the socialization framework (Weidman, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001) with questions categorized by anticipatory stage, formal stage, informal stage, and personal stage. The second interview protocol was developed after initial data analysis of the first interviews and focused on more details about the transition to their graduate programs, the influence of UGSAC on their knowledge, awareness, and skills, and their recommendations for the future of UGSAC.

**Participants**

The recruitment process yielded the participation of seven new professionals who met the criteria. Five participants identified as women and two identified as men. Two participants identified as Latinx and the remaining five identified as White. The seven participants, represented four respective undergraduate institutions in various geographical regions of the U.S., including the Southeast, Great Lakes, Midwest, and Mountain West. Participants attended six respective institutions for their master’s degree representing the same geographic locations as the undergraduate institutions. The participants each completed UGSAC as part of an undergraduate minor. Participants’ majors were in the social sciences: communications, psychology, and human development. Participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Undergraduate Year</th>
<th>Graduate School Year</th>
<th>Went Directly to Graduate School from Undergraduate Degree</th>
<th>First Generation Student</th>
<th>Traditional Student</th>
<th>Student Employee</th>
<th>Same University for Undergraduate and Graduate Degree</th>
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<td>White</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Woman</td>
<td>Other (American Indian &amp; Latinx)</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>2020</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**
Following the transcription of the first interviews, the three-person research team employed an inductive approach to data analysis, which included a multi-step process (Creswell, 2002). The socialization framework was utilized by each member of the team to organize codes based on Weidman et al.’s (2001) four stages. Independently, after each reading the first interview transcripts, we employed process coding (Saldaña, 2016) to understand the experiences of participants in UGSAC. From the codes identified, we separately developed initial themes and then came to a consensus on the most salient themes that represented participants’ experiences related to the influence of UGSAC on their transition to graduate school and socialization into the profession of student affairs. The second interview data provided further context to participants’ experiences as the initial themes were confirmed and expanded with additional data. We utilized a similar coding and theme development process to analyze both rounds of data resulting in three main themes.

Findings
We sought to understand how engaging in UGSAC contributed to the participants’ transition to graduate preparation programs and served as a method of professional socialization in student affairs. We found that UGSAC contributed to 1) participants’ knowledge of foundational concepts included in introductory graduate program courses, 2) confidence engaging in graduate-level course environments, and 3) advanced levels of functional area exploration resulting in preferences. Each of these benefits of UGSAC contributed to participants’ transition into student affairs graduate programs and aided in their choice to pursue student affairs, ultimately demonstrating the utility of UGSAC as a meaningful source of their professional socialization.

Development of Foundational Knowledge
The participants described arriving to graduate school feeling prepared and confident because their engagement in UGSAC had equipped them with a strong baseline of student affairs foundational knowledge. They noted that knowledge of student development theory, concepts related to student success and retention, and professional values around equity, diversity, and inclusion were particularly useful to their transition. This foundational knowledge allowed them to enter graduate coursework with an ability to integrate new learning and make connections across courses more seamlessly than had they not been previously exposed to the content. When discussing this, Fabiola shared,

“I really learned the foundations and the tip of the iceberg of concepts, ideas, and theories. Now, in graduate school, I’m going a little bit more in depth, I’m picking them apart more and dissecting them and really thinking intersectionally about the concepts. So, I think that undergrad provided an amazing foundation of different concepts for me...because I had already heard of some of these terms and ideas.”

Fabiola was able to critique and explore concepts in more depth because of the foundational exposure in UGSAC. Jeanne echoed Fabiola when she discussed her experience transitioning into graduate coursework.

“I think it was just having the base and a starting point, not feeling like everything I was learning was brand new. So, I was able to spend more time focusing on the things that were a little bit harder, that I needed to read again because I didn’t understand what that theory was saying. I was learning and growing and still understanding things in a different way. But I didn’t have to start from scratch.”
Fabiola’s ability to connect concepts and Jeanne’s description of not having to “start from scratch” was resonant across the data. Alejandro shared,

“My undergraduate course work, the way it prepared me for my transition, that basic knowledge... very foundational knowledge that I was able to enter graduate school with, I had a bit more competence. Like, I knew what this was when we used higher ed terms.”

The participants’ level of foundational knowledge was useful not only from a product point of view (i.e., what the students knew), but also from a process point of view (i.e., how their knowledge shaped their engagement). For instance, Nick noted a difference in his ability to engage with graduate level coursework because of his exposure to student affairs concepts in UGSAC.

“It set me apart, to be better equipped to have discussions in class. I already had a certain foundation for the material. I knew the theories, the frameworks, so my first theories class was relatively easy to understand, and I was able to have more in depth conversations with the faculty and peers.”

Nick went on to explain how his foundational knowledge allowed him to integrate content among courses. He described how his UGSAC coursework prepared him to comprehend content to then connect it to concepts taught in other courses.

“I was able to make more connections across classes. So, we would have three different classes, then I’d be able to pick up quicker when the material was relating across all three. I think that was also attributed to having some semblance of prior knowledge.”

The participants viewed the knowledge gained in UGSAC as a strong contributing factor to their ability to integrate knowledge in graduate coursework, make connections across the graduate curriculum, and engage with the material in deep, critical, and meaningful ways. Importantly, engaging in UGSAC also enhanced their level of confidence as they transitioned into their graduate programs.

Confidence in Graduate Course Environments
Beyond the impact of UGSAC on participants’ transition to graduate coursework, they also shared ways that the structure of their UGSAC gave them confidence to engage in graduate style courses. They noticed the broader skills developed such as oral and written communication and ability to read strategically and critically, which assisted as they transitioned into their role as full-time graduate students.

Jeanne’s undergraduate student affairs courses were cross listed as graduate courses, meaning that she was learning alongside graduate students. She described learning alongside graduate student as an advantage to her learning and considered her exposure to higher levels of writing expectations in UGSAC as integral to her confidence in her master’s program.

“It’s mostly the confidence and feeling empowered pieces. Seeing that I could do something that was difficult, to take grad level classes as an undergrad. But it really made me feel confident in my abilities as a writer, as someone who could discuss these higher-level topics.”
Students may experience anxiety when beginning their next level of education. Having a glimpse into graduate level student affairs courses as an undergraduate student uniquely situated Jeanne’s preparation for the increased rigor.

For Nick, who also took cross-listed undergraduate/graduate courses, the student affairs courses provided exposure to the culture and norms of graduate-level learning.

“I learned a lot and having had those experience even better prepared me to be a master’s student. I had a better sense of what the grad class was like, the kind of attitude and atmosphere that’s created in those spaces.”

In addition to understanding the atmosphere of graduate level courses, Nick noted how his reading skills were enhanced in his UGSAC, which led to a more successful transition to graduate student affairs coursework, particularly in comparison to his peers. Nick said,

“... having already been exposed [to graduate-level coursework], I knew things already, so I was able to read, and it was almost as if I was rereading things, more revisiting the information as opposed to learning it for the first time. And I think that it really set me apart.”

Early exposure to graduate-level learning is not a guarantee of UGSAC. However, participants whose UGSAC was not cross-listed as a graduate course reported a similar confidence in graduate-level coursework as participants whose UGSAC was cross listed. For example, Lindsey shared how her UGSAC contributed to her peers’ learning and allowed her to experiment with concepts in her work.

“Nothing was a surprise, and I wasn’t starting from scratch. Sometimes I would help my peers when they were searching for a word or a theory. I could generate that for them and that was very confidence-building. I think that I probably did better academically because I was more confident in myself and could take more risks when writing papers.”

All participants articulated the influence of their foundational level of knowledge about student affairs content and, for two participants, their direct exposure to graduate-level course environments, was noted as being essential to their feelings of success in the graduate-level classroom settings. This had great benefits to them, including increased sense of confidence and ability to take risks academically. Their UGSAC experiences also positioned them to support their peers’ learning.

**Functional Area Exploration**

A major component of student affairs graduate coursework includes exploration of functional areas and career decision-making around ideal work environments (CAS, 2019). UGSAC allowed participants early opportunities to learn about functional areas and consider where their values and skills would fit best. Five participants described feeling secure in their functional areas of interest as they entered graduate school because of the exploration through UGSAC and leadership experiences.

Jeanne was introduced to student conduct during her UGSAC. It was an area of student affairs that she continued to pursue in her first post-graduate professional position. She described her engagement with UGSAC as being the reason she was able to recognize this career option early
and, when she had the opportunity, to alter her graduate assistantship position during her first semester as a graduate student. She explained,

“I think being able to explore some of the different functional areas and pieces like that in my UGSAC was helpful to already have an idea of what kind of work I might want to do. Because one of the first classes we took in our graduate program was an introduction to student affairs, we did a deep dive into functional areas. And a lot of people... again, my peers were still exploring, and I had a pretty good idea going in as to... different functional areas I wanted to get experience. Being able to reflect on when I was in the housing assistantship, ‘okay, this is not what I want. It has a piece of what I’m doing, a little bit of student conduct.’ But when another opportunity [in student conduct] opened up, I felt comfortable saying ‘okay, I know this will be a better fit because it’s something that I want to explore.’”

Jeanne’s UGSAC experience helped to illuminate her desired functional area early on. This was consistent for many of the participants. For example, Alejandro’s undergraduate student affairs internship as part of his coursework impacted his future career decisions as he gained early knowledge of functional areas. He said,

“When I did this internship, it really exposed me to different functional areas. So, with the coursework and the assignments I was doing, it really helped me narrow down and identify what that next step was for me in terms of functional area and/or experience that I wanted to start off with.”

Not only did UGSAC help participants identify their functional area preferences early on, but it also exposed them to the range of possibilities in student affairs, giving them a holistic understanding of the profession. Lindsey described this, explaining,

“Specifically, the [graduate class] that had sections of student development theory and a little bit of context behind the whole field in general...some of my peers felt very lost when we were talking about the history of student affairs and understanding the breadth of the functional areas. A lot of folks get interested in housing or orientation and then think that those might be the only two areas that you can work in. We were also exploring accessibility services and education abroad services and all these other things. So, I think I just had a solid foundation.”

The foundational knowledge and confidence gained in UGSAC contributed to participants’ transition to the profession through comprehensive exposure to functional area opportunities, which helped them see the breadth of student affairs while also helping them to narrow down the functional areas of interest. Moreover, the participants shared how a broader exposure to student affairs in a curricular setting solidified their decision to pursue a graduate degree in student affairs and, ultimately, remain in the field.

**Discussion**

The findings from this study indicate that socialization into student affairs, which has largely been documented as happening at the graduate program level, is occurring in meaningful ways in UGSAC. The findings relate directly to Weidman et al.’s (2001) graduate and professional socialization stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. We found that the participants
moved through the anticipatory, formal, and informal stages of professional socialization; but evidence of the personal stage of professional socialization was largely unobserved.

**Anticipatory Stage**
To the benefit of student affairs graduate preparation programs’ recruitment efforts, UGSAC supported participants’ decision to pursue a graduate degree in student affairs, which exemplifies the anticipatory socialization process (Weidman et al., 2001). All seven participants entered their UGSAC with the intention of pursuing a graduate degree in student affairs. The UGSAC served as an essential source of support and encouragement in their graduate school pursuits. Their UGSAC experiences helped them develop a sense of readiness to engage in graduate course environments.

**Formal Stage**
We found that the participants’ development of foundational knowledge around student affairs concepts in UGSAC allowed them to begin the formal stage of socialization prior to beginning graduate school. This is an important offering of this research, as the formal stage of socialization begins during graduate school. Because of their knowledge of foundational content, their introductory graduate program courses provided opportunities for them to apply their knowledge quickly, begin to integrate their learning across the curriculum, and provide support to their peers who did not have formal, academic exposure to student affairs content prior to graduate school. Based on the analysis of the study data, participants’ early entrance into the formal stage of socialization is a central benefit to establishing UGSAC as a method of professional socialization.

**Informal Stage**
The participants described benefits of UGSAC that extended beyond formal curriculum. In fact, their engagement in UGSAC enhanced their confidence in their ability to successfully engage in a graduate-level environment, including their capacity to participate in in-depth discussions around student affairs concepts and build dialogic relationships with faculty members. Participants’ experiences in UGSAC positioned them to serve as sources of support for their non-UGSAC peers. Although the participants did not report that their UGSAC contributed to increased success in securing their graduate assistant positions or their ability to perform in those positions, they described UGSAC as having provided them with an advanced level of exploration in terms of the functional areas they sought out.

**Personal Stage**
Due to the design and scope of this study, we did not discover evidence of the participants’ being in the personal stage of the professional socialization framework. The UGSAC contributed to participants’ exploration of their preferred functional areas. However, they did not describe engaging in practices that promoted some sort of change or alignment in their identity with respect to their preferred functional area. We believe this may demonstrate a limit of UGSAC. Despite UGSAC empowering the participants to meaningfully advance in the anticipatory, formal, and informal stages of professional socialization, perhaps movement in the personal stage of professional socialization is more likely to occur in graduate level coursework or during their experiences as new professionals.

**Key Delimitations and Limitations**
There are three limitations to this study worth noting. First, the findings must be considered within the context of the participant eligibility criteria. All participants ultimately pursued a graduate degree in student affairs. Although their voices were necessary to understand the
influence of UGSAC on their socialization into the profession, the findings do not incorporate the voices of students for whom the UGSAC experience did not resonate the field of student affairs as a viable career option. For students who did not ultimately pursue a career in student affairs, understanding what aspects of the UGSAC inhibited their decision to pursue student affairs is a worthy exploration. Second, although we achieved participant representation from four institutions with UGSAC offerings, there are at least 10 additional institutions offering UGSAC. Exploring students who engaged in UGSAC in those institutional contexts would be useful to examine if their students’ experiences resonate with our findings. Finally, one of our participants did not complete both interviews. Although we believe the dataset would have been stronger with their full participation, we proceeded with analysis and the reporting of findings as we determined we reached data saturation.

**Recommendations for Professional Socialization in Student Affairs**

Our study's findings illustrate a multitude of benefits of UGSAC, particularly for students seeking a graduate degree in student affairs. Because of this, we recommend institutional leaders, particularly those with graduate student affairs course programs, consider how they might establish or expand UGSAC offerings. Consistent with the emerging trends related to UGSAC, these offerings could be packaged as stand-alone courses, academic minors, or emphasis areas within existing baccalaureate degree programs. We believe that this would aid in creating a strong pipeline for student affairs graduate preparation programs and, ultimately, a strong pipeline of future student affairs leaders.

Early exposure and preparation in the academic setting during the UGSAC provided students the opportunity to connect their co-curricular leadership and engagement experiences with possible career paths. Participants said that their most impactful courses allowed them to explore various functional areas, and that knowledge allowed them to be more purposeful in their selection of a practical experiences in graduate school. Additionally, the participants’ learning about student development theory, the theoretical underpinning of student affairs work, ensured they had a strong foundation for courses grounded in theory. With a background in student development theory, participants applied the theory quickly because they had already began mastering some of their understanding of the content. These findings demonstrate the critical role of teaching participants about student development theory to move them to and through the formal stage of professional socialization.

In addition to the benefits that having a strong grasp of the foundational content in early graduate school courses, participants felt prepared and confident to begin their graduate coursework in student affairs because they had experienced learning environments like those they experienced in graduate school. Being able to participate in discussion-based courses that encouraged them to share their college experiences engendered participants confidence as they moved into their graduate coursework. Two of the participants learned in UGSACs that were cross listed as graduate courses. This model might be useful to student affairs faculty at other institutions offering UGSAC. The co-listing of courses can uniquely contribute to undergraduate students’ preparation for graduate coursework by exposing them to graduate-level classroom environments and expectations. We understand that cross-listing coursework poses other challenges including concerns around rigor as well as logistical concerns. However, based on our findings, we believe that this practice can serve as a useful component of professional socialization in the both the formal and informal stages.

**Recommendations for Future Research**
UGSAC is an emerging phenomenon and remains relatively unstudied, and there is a great deal of room for empirical exploration (McKenzie et al., 2017). First, future research should examine how UGSAC is formed on a college campus, including curriculum development, instructional decision-making, course formats, and type of course offering (e.g., independent electives; academic minor). Second, future research might explore the impact of UGSAC on students who do not go on to pursue a career in student affairs. What do these students report as positive outcomes of engaging in UGSAC? What factors were included in their decision to ultimately not pursue additional coursework in student affairs at the graduate level? Third, future research could focus on how students make meaning of UGSAC, particularly learning about college student development theory, as undergraduate students. In what ways does this aid students in their development during college? In what ways does this position students to support their peers or engage in their community differently?

An important consideration of the findings of this study is that a negative experience in students’ UGSAC might have altered their original graduate school plans. The requirements to participate in this study were predicated on participants having either completed or being in the process of completing a student affairs graduate degree, which makes us unable to explore reasons UGSAC could have deterred students from pursuing student affairs. Certainly however, the participants found the graduate school preparation components of their UGSAC curriculum as a support in their graduate school application process. Additionally, the mentorship provided by UGSAC instructors was also key as participants engaged in the application process. Future research should focus on students’ experiences in UGSAC that led them to choose an alternative career path despite initially considering student affairs as a viable career opportunity.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the utility of UGSAC as a method of early professional socialization for student affairs professionals. Based on this, we offered recommendations for future professional socialization efforts and research on UGSAC, all of which will help build and sustain a pipeline of students who will enter student affairs graduate programs and become the future of the field of student affairs. Recruiting undergraduate students into UGSAC is a challenge because students do not typically recognize student affairs as a career until they are exposed to it through campus-based leadership opportunities and mentors (Blimling, 2002; Gergely, 2014; Taub & McEwen, 2006; Tull et al., 2009). Even still, that exposure may be limited to the functional area in which a student finds themselves, leaving out the range of career possibilities in the profession (e.g., an orientation leader enjoying their involvement in orientation, but not having an awareness of career paths in multicultural affairs). As a result, there is limited time for UGSAC to be utilized in ways that might begin the professional socialization process. However, the participants in this study described a few benefits that flowed from their engagement in UGSAC.

As the field of student affairs continues to grapple with the realities of attrition, we must consider new ways of bringing people into the field and sustaining their commitments to student affairs work. UGSAC is a viable approach to doing just that—connecting undergraduate students to the field of student affairs in a formal, academic way. For those who go on to pursue a career in the field, UGSAC serves as a meaningful way to begin their professional socialization and, hopefully, enrich their capacity to sustain worthwhile careers supporting students and institutions of higher education.

**References**

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