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Graduate Service-Learning Experiences and Career Preparation: An Exploration of Student Perceptions

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Abstract

This dissertation overview summarizes a study exploring the relationship between service-learning and career preparation from the perspective of graduate students as adult learners. Using Knowles' adult learning theory as the theoretical framework and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a qualitative method of inquiry, analysis of semistructured interviews from six recent graduates of a media advocacy master's degree program found that graduate students perceive service-learning as a supportive experience for their own career preparation. Findings from this study can help faculty and graduate educators conceptualize and implement service-learning experiences, informed by adult learning theory, by aligning them with graduate students' own professional goals and outcomes.

Keywords: service-learning, career preparation, adult learning theory, graduate education

Over the past several decades, both U.S. graduate education and service-learning and community engagement (S-LCE) have been the focus of growing research interest. Although substantial empirical evidence documents the impact of service-learning experiences on undergraduate students, S-LCE scholarship and practice less often include the graduate student population (Bringle et al., 2012; Harris, 2017; Jacoby, 2014; Kuh, 2008). This discrepancy has led to an explicit call for more research on graduate S-LCE from within the field (Harris, 2017; Morin et al., 2016). As a form of experiential learning, service-learning is a pedagogical tool that intentionally links academic coursework with service or community engagement through purposeful and structured course design and reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jacoby, 2014; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013).

With nearly 2 million graduate students enrolled in the United States annually (Okahana et al., 2020), this population deserves further study. For instance, past research has found that professional and career advancement are among the top reasons students pursue formal graduate-level education (Merriam et al., 2012), especially at the master's degree level. Employers expect adults with graduate-level degrees to demonstrate maturity, a strong work ethic, responsiveness to feedback, teamwork and collaboration, effective communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as the ability to apply knowledge to new contexts (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Wendler et al., 2012; Wickam, 2015).

However, employers also report many students completing graduate school ill-prepared for the workforce (Wendler et al., 2012). This disconnect presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between service-learning and career preparation for graduate students. The purpose of this dissertation study was to explore the relationship between service-learning and career preparation from the perspective of graduate students as adult learners, with the following guiding research question: "How do graduate students perceive the relationship between their service-learning experiences and career preparation?"

Theoretical Framework

Malcolm Knowles' adult learning theory, or andragogy, served as the theoretical framework for this study; see the dissertation itself for a more in-depth review of the theory. Adult learning theory posits that adults learn differently than children (Knowles et al., 2005). Strongly rooted in humanism, adult learning theory focuses on the individual learner and has six guiding principles or assumptions (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; see also the dissertation for a more comprehensive set of sources). First, as a person ages and matures in their lifetime, they view themselves as being independent and become more self-directed in their own learning. Second, adults bring substantive prior experiences to the table in any learning context, and they learn best through experience. Third, an adult learner's readiness to learn is intricately linked to their social roles; in the context of andragogy, these include roles or identities that one takes on in society at a moment in time and in relationship to other humans. Fourth, adult learners are more problem-centered rather than subject-centered in their learning. Fifth, adult learners are internally rather than externally motivated. And sixth, adult learners want to know what they need to know, or more specifically, need to understand the rationalization or justification for why they are asked to learn something.

Knowles' adult learning theory has also been challenged as overly focused on the individual learner and as providing a set of guiding principles or assumptions rather than a theory per se (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Merriam et al., 2006; Sandlin, 2005). Thus, additional research using andragogy's principles may help enhance understanding of this framework's applicability and utility.

Graduate Students, Career Advancement, and Service-Learning

Graduate students as adult learners often pursue advanced-level degrees for career and professional advancement (Merriam et al., 2012), yet multiple studies and reports document the lack of alignment or gap between students' competencies and the needs of employers (e.g., Christian & Davis, 2016; Golde & Dore, 2001; Molinari & Ellis, 2013; Sundberg et al., 2011; Wendler et al., 2012). Desired professional competencies of graduate students are guided by employers (Wendler et al., 2012), faculty members (Levkoe et al., 2014; Solem et al., 2013), and professional organizations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Pontius & Harper, 2006), among other stakeholders.

Socialization is one of the hallmarks of graduate education (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006; Nesheim et al., 2006), and socialization into an academic discipline and career trajectory by faculty and peers is a frequently studied phenomenon (e.g., Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Pontius & Harper, 2006; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Such socialization and professional development may include participation in professional organizations and networks (Gardner & Barnes, 2007), presenting at conferences and receiving funding for travel (Pontius & Harper, 2006; Rizzolo et al., 2016), and skill building (Solem et al., 2013). However, graduate education's disciplinary silos (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Pontius & Harper, 2006; Weidman & Stein, 2003) can disconnect graduate students from the institution as a whole, and it is often assumed that the academic department, via its faculty, is aware of and responsible for a vast array of student needs (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

Pontius and Harper (2006) argued that graduate students should be more intentionally prepared for their future career and should be provided engagement opportunities that go beyond the classroom to promote learning and development. As faculty members play a significant role in students' socialization in graduate school and in addressing their professional development needs, service-learning is one documented avenue to help prepare graduates for the workforce (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2016; Doberneck et al., 2017; Goodhue, 2017; Liddell et al., 2014).

Because graduate education is so closely tied to the discipline, most studies of student service-learning experiences are focused on a single course or program, including studies documenting graduate students' civic engagement outcomes in nursing programs (DeBonis, 2016) as well as professional values and outcomes in the fields of social work, physical education teacher education, nutrition, and public administration (Byers & Gray, 2012; Dinour et al., 2018; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Meaney et al., 2012). Additionally, a study completed by Levkoe et al. (2014) suggested that the impacts of service-learning may actually be intensi-

fied for graduate students compared to their undergraduate counterparts. Furthermore, although community engagement in graduate education has its roots in socializing and preparing graduate students to become faculty (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006), the rise of the professional master's degree has created additional opportunities for integrating service-learning into other disciplines and workforce-oriented programs.

Research Design

This qualitative research study was grounded in a social constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method of inquiry (Creswell, 2008; Ponterotto, 2005). IPA focuses on the lived experiences of individual participants while simultaneously acknowledging the role that the researcher plays in interpretation (Smith et al., 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2014; see the dissertation for a more robust review of this method and its underlying principles). The sampling for this study was purposive; participants were selected because they shared, at least on the surface, a type of common experience. The research site was a private, urban research institution in the northeast United States and received the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement for the first time in 2015. Research participants were identified through email and digital flyer outreach to service-learning faculty members and community engagement staff at the research site, who shared the opportunity with their former students. Prospective participants met four eligibility criteria: (1) be currently enrolled in a master's-level degree program at the research site or have graduated within the past year at the time of the interview, (2) completed a graduate-level service-learning course at the research site within the prior 3 years, (3) be intending to enter or reenter the workforce upon completion of their program of study, and (4) be within 21–35 years old. Participants were welcomed from any academic department or college at the research site, and the study was open to participants of all genders, ethnicities/races, and socioeconomic levels. The research site was a predominantly White institution, and the diversity of enrollment in the graduate programs offering service-learning courses was unknown.

Although the study was open to students in all disciplines, all six participants emerged from a single, required, foundational-level course in a media advocacy graduate degree program focused on the intersection of communication, digital media, and law and policy. In the course, students worked in small groups of three or four as a consulting team, each assigned to a different community partner organization. All six participants were enrolled in the program's first cohort beginning in fall 2018 and took the course without knowing that it included service-learning. At the time of the interviews all six had completed their degree program within the last 8–12 months, meaning they completed their service-learning experience 2 years prior, and were currently in or pursuing a career related to their media advocacy degree. Two of the six participants worked part-time and the other four worked full-time while taking classes. They ranged from 25 to 34 years old. Five participants identified as female, five identified as White, and two identified as Jewish.

I conducted individual semi structured, in-depth interviews with each research participant to "offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" from their unique perspective (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Interviews took place over Zoom, using the audio recording auto transcription feature for each interview. The study followed key criteria and standards of ethics, quality, and rigor of qualitative research, including IRB approval, informed consent processes, and secure data storage (Creswell, 2008; Tracy, 2010). I used thick descriptions in my presentation of data and detailed excerpts from each of the participants' interviews, engaged in member checking, and consistently reflected on my use of codes to ensure the study had credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2012; Tracy, 2010). Finally, I was transparent about my values and biases that influence my worldview and perceptions as a scholar–practitioner in the field of S-LCE and higher education, particularly my attitudes toward higher education's responsibility to prepare students for work and being a community engagement professional (Briscoe, 2005).

The analysis stage of an IPA study is "complex, iterative, and [a] multi-directional process" (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 77) and roughly follows a six-step process (Smith et al., 2012). First, I became im-

mersed in the data by listening to each recorded interview and reading the transcript in an attempt to recenter the participant's experience, followed by several rereads of the transcript. Second, I noted anything of interest within the transcript while keeping an open mind. Third, I developed emergent themes from the transcripts and the initial notes, which were short phrases that embodied the essence of the data, both the specific passage and the transcript as a whole. Fourth, I made connections between the emergent themes. Fifth, I repeated the process for each separate transcript for each research participant individually, treating each as a particular or unique case. Sixth, I looked for "patterns across cases but trie[d] to retain the individual detail and nuance of the case" (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 74). This involved reviewing the themes that emerged across all of the participants and creating a table with the key themes from each participant. At this point, I transitioned from exploratory coding to process coding (Saldaña, 2016) to verify and analyze the findings.

Analysis and Key Findings

Iterative coding and analysis of participant interviews revealed three distinct themes with subthemes that shed light on how each participant perceived the relationship between their service-learning experiences and career development (see Table 1).

The first theme explored the concept of experience and how participants interpreted the meaning and purpose of their experience. All six graduate students discussed their service-learning as being a real or real-world experience that ultimately connected to their career preparation in some way. For example, one participant commented,

> It allowed me to essentially have a receipt. I was able to say I got a degree in essentially strategic communications in a nonprofit or advocacy space and within that degree I also had the opportunity to consult a nonprofit organization on their strategic communications approach in such a way that they probably wouldn't have been able to afford or wouldn't have been able to devote the resources to actual communications firm or professional marketing professional. So I think being able to say that I filled that role in some way was certainly beneficial because I feel that it just gave me more experience, real tangible, real life experience and it kind of gave me the confidence to be able to speak on that whereas I think without this course and without this degree, in particularly without the course, I wouldn't have been able to say that I had experience like consulting an organization on their communication strategy.

The value or weight they each put on the experience varied; experience in and of

Table 1. Major Themes and Subthemes

Major theme	Subthemes
Significance of experience	• Motivation and goal alignment • Applied learning and skills • Self-efficacy and confidence • Authenticity
Course conditions	• Peer relationships • Balancing school and work • Semester time frame
Community relationships	• Human connections • Being an outsider • Capacity building

itself was not universally valued as having a transformative or substantial impact.

The second theme unpacked how certain conditions were inherent to the structure of the experience because it was part of an academic course. Peer relationships, the demands of balancing school and work, and the semester time frame all emerged as subthemes. For example, in context of the impact of the semester time frame, another participant shared,

> I always, personally, I always feel like, am I really helping them? Is this really helping? I think in some ways it is because it provides an outside perspective, but it always seems to me like our recommendations were for them to hire interns who could actually do a lot of the work and as students and coming from an outside perspective, there's only so much you can do in a short amount of time for class.

The course context, as a discrete unit in which the service-learning experience took place, also had an influence on the perceived relationship to their career preparation.

Finally, the third theme examined how the participants highlighted and conceptualized their relationship to the community. Three subthemes emerged, including the significance of human connections, what it means to be an outsider, and why capacity building is significant in a professional context. For example, a third participant reflected on the importance of the human connections they made.

> I've understood the meaning, the impact of that experience to have evolved. I don't have many specific memories of work I did in that program. There are entire classes I've forgotten completely, you'd have to remind me. Going to visit [my community partner] is not something I'm going to forget. . . . You know, thinking of that, it put this place in my head, but now I have to think about and remember, it is a place that's real and wonder how the people there are doing.

Essentially, participants' relationship to the community became a way of describing their experiences, learning, and application of professional concepts.

Additionally, four key findings emerged in this study. First, for both novice and experienced professionals, graduate service-learning can build skills and self-efficacy that relate positively to their career trajectory. This study's participants were able to gain skills and self-efficacy from the service-learning experience, consistent with other studies demonstrating skills graduate students developed through service-learning (e.g., Dietz, 2018; Levkoe et al., 2014; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Moorer, 2009; Wickam, 2015). Teamwork and collaboration are among the skills that employers expect of employees with graduate degrees (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Wendler et al., 2012); from the participants' perspectives, the teamwork and collaboration required within the group service-learning project directly related to their career preparation.

Second, however, integrating a service-learning experience into a course in and of itself may not automatically support students' career goals, even when there is strong alignment between the degree program, principles of service-learning, and students' drive to positively contribute to society through their career. In this study, the service-learning experience did not meet all students' career preparation goals or expectations, especially when those goals were targeted or narrowly defined. The course offered participants limited choices for their service-learning community partner because the instructor had prearranged the relationships and projects. Although an element of choice was available, some participants felt constrained because they wanted experience in a specific field or setting. Further, this limitation of choice detracted from some participants' experience because, as self-directed learners, they would benefit from making decisions as part of the learning process (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Hagen & Park, 2016; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Third, service-learning can highlight tensions between students' social roles. All of the participants expressed that they enrolled in graduate school for career and professionally motivated reasons. They saw their social role as a student as investing in their future professional self. However, the demands of individual social roles were sometimes in conflict or tension with one another (Onorato-Hughes, 2019; Wyland et al., 2015). For some, their social role as an employee was just as important as

their social role as a student because they needed employment in order to finance their education. The demands of being an employee conflicted with the demands of being a student; the time commitments for service-learning projects, for instance, can be a source of tension for adult learners managing many roles and commitments.

Finally, graduate students are aware of (even if not satisfied with) how the structures of academia impact the extent to which service-learning supports their career preparation. Prior research suggests that faculty members and graduate programs should examine how they can integrate experiences and opportunities for professional preparation into the curriculum so that students do not always need to look beyond their coursework for those opportunities while in school (Gu et al., 2018). Time, location, finances, and accessibility, in addition to other life factors such as family commitments, can serve as barriers to many professional development experiences for graduate students (Rizzolo et al., 2016); service-learning courses as well as other institution-wide programs can serve in part as a response to this challenge (Doberneck et al., 2017; Goodhue, 2017; Matthews et al., 2015). In the current study, not only did the students have to negotiate with their community partner to ensure the project was feasible within the amount of time they had, but they imagined the potential if they were not bound by those limits (such as a single semester's course). For instance, they imagined scenarios where they could have continued working with the partners throughout their graduate school experience, and the resulting benefits.

This dissertation study had certain limitations. IPA involves a small sample size and is concerned with the individual or particular experiences of each research participant, and therefore the study lacks broad generalizability (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). In fact, as noted, all participants were from the same degree program and service-learning course. However, that does not mean that lessons gleaned from this study are not transferable to other contexts or experiences. Additionally, at the time of the interviews, all participants had graduated from their graduate program 8–12 months prior, so they had completed their service-learning experience approximately 2 years before the interview. Therefore, it is possible that the lapse in time impacted their recall (Giele & Elder, 1998). This study was conceptualized and initiated before 2020, but the interviews took place during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The landscape of graduate education and labor markets is currently in flux, which will likely have implications for enrollments, job security, and employment needs in the United States.

Significance and Recommendations for Practice

Pairing adult learning theory and IPA to explore the relationship between service-learning and graduate students' career preparation offers a unique lens and framework to the S-LCE field. Knowles' adult learning theory as a theoretical framework for understanding graduate service-learning is a robust opportunity for future research (Dietz, 2018; Wickam, 2015). For example, it would be exciting to unpack how students perceive the relationship between service-learning and their career preparation in business, public policy, organizational communications, public health, engineering, and other disciplines that offer service-learning courses for graduate students at the research site. Such exploration might include seeking themes that stretch beyond an individual course or discipline since the limitation of studies to a single course or discipline continues to be a challenge in S-LCE research (Morin et al., 2016). Additionally, future research should further examine how service-learning might contribute to or further support masters'-level students' self-efficacy and professional identity since this population has demonstrated having lower perceptions of their professional identity and competencies than their doctoral-level peers in other studies (Hardré & Hackett, 2015).

This study also adds to the discussion of how service-learning addresses employer expectations, particularly for master's-level graduates in the 21st-century workforce. Documenting the voices and perceptions of those who participate in service-learning is likewise crucial; in considering implications for curricular and program design, we need to include students' perspectives and hear their voices in the research (Cooke & Kemeny, 2014).

This dissertation's findings, paired with other scholarship on adult learning, graduate education, and service-learning, sug-

gests three recommendations for practice. First, as graduate students can clearly benefit from service-learning, institutions should continue to invest in such opportunities for graduate students as a strategy to help prepare them for their future careers. By engaging in service-learning experiences, graduate students can grow their skill sets and build self-efficacy as they work toward their professional goals. Adult learners especially value experiential opportunities that are problem-based rather than subject-centered, aligning with their motivations to pursue graduate education to advance their careers (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). As with undergraduates, service-learning builds skills expected by employers, such as teamwork, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Wendler et al., 2012; Wickam, 2015). Of course, other aspects of graduate education can also help provide career readiness. However, since service-learning is embedded into coursework and is meant to align with curricular learning outcomes, it represents a more consistent means for institutionalizing this support than voluntary experiences that may conflict with adult learners' availability and time.

As a second consideration, departments or faculty members who are weighing how or whether to integrate service-learning into the graduate curriculum or a particular course should evaluate the desired and potential outcomes beyond service-learning's known benefits to learning course content and supporting the community. If service-learning is intended to offer intentional opportunities that help students prepare for their careers, the graduate program should be explicit about that goal, as well as the expectations, commitments, and limitations of the engagement for the student. Such explicitness supports adult learners' motivations and their need to know the rationale behind what they are learning, allows them to better balance competing social roles, and can clarify the extent to which they are able or expected to be self-directed in their learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Third, graduate programs, faculty, and students should be encouraged to nurture relationships with community organizations that could lead to other career-supportive intersections throughout the curriculum. Graduate programs can help foster these connections more formally, through intentional integration across multiple service-learning courses, or through lower stakes activities such as invitations to a guest speaker or employer panel, or networking opportunities and events. In essence, continued partnership building can further serve graduate students' eagerness for experiential learning opportunities as adult learners. However, university representatives need to have authentic and honest conversations with community partners to understand their long-term goals and expected benefits from investing time, energy, and resources into such a partnership (e.g., Clayton et al., 2010) to help ensure these relationships are not exploitative or transactional.

As gatekeepers of the curriculum and key socializing influences in the graduate student experience, faculty are uniquely positioned to offer service-learning and to clarify its benefits to their graduate students. Students want opportunities that allow them to apply their learning in a real-world context and better position them for their future professional goals. Service-earning offers a compelling opportunity to meet students' expectations for graduate education, to address the skills and competency gap expressed by employers, and to expand the portfolio of opportunities for institutions to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to community engagement at all levels.

The full dissertation is accessible via ProQuest.

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