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## EXAMINING SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER IDENTITY IN PEER-LED RESEARCH COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this study is to explore how research skills and communities can be promoted in student affairs and/or higher education graduate preparation programs through a peer-led, team-based model.
Background	Numerous scholars emphasized a lack of empirical research being conducted by student affairs professionals, even though integration of scholarship with practice remains of critical importance to field of higher education.
Methodology	Though a descriptive case study of a graduate research course, we engage both quantitative and qualitative data points in a convergent parallel mixed methods design.
Contribution	This study provides an important contribution in understanding how graduate programs may better prepare students to engage within a spectrum of scholar-practitioner identity.
Findings	Findings suggest that while participants see value in a scholar-practitioner identity and its impact on their future goals, there is often a discrepancy between the perceived feasibility of embodying the role in actual student affairs practice as well as variations across master's and doctoral student levels.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Recommendations for practice include working to integrate scholarship in professional positions and promoting greater collaboration between graduate coursework and professional supervisors.

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Recommendation for Researchers	Recommendations for researchers include continuing to examine how communities of practice develop across the levels of graduate socialization.
Impact on Society	Understanding how individuals engage in scholarship in their fields carries interdisciplinary implications for merging research into professional roles.
Future Research	A key area for future research is longitudinal inquiry into how emerging professionals in higher education/student affairs negotiate the scholar-practitioner spectrum across career development.
Keywords	Scholar-Practitioner, Student Affairs, Higher Education, Communities of Practice

## INTRODUCTION

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While higher education communities increasingly promote the development of scholar-practitioners, there is an acknowledged gap regarding how individuals integrate multiple skill sets to fulfill this role (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Numerous scholars demonstrate a lack of empirical research and scholarly writing being conducted by student affairs professionals (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Hatfield & Wise, 2013; Saunders, Bates, Register, Dadonna, & Cooper, 2000; Schroeder & Pike, 2001). This issue is in direct conflict with professional standards and desired competencies as defined by student affairs associations such as ACPA College Student Educators International (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), both of whom state the importance of professionals developing research-literate scholar-practitioners (ACPA/NASPA Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards, 2010). In 2006, NASPA held a Summit on Scholarship in Student Affairs to discuss the past, present, and future of research in the field. At this summit, faculty and practitioners agreed that, “research question formulation, methods choice, and data analysis are all critical skills to be taught within preparation programs” (Jablonski, Mena, Manning, Carpenter, & Siko, 2006, p. 197). Since then, a recurrent reason cited for the disconnect between a desire for student affairs research engagement and its actual occurrence is inadequate graduate preparation in research literacy, design, and implementation (Hatfield & Wise, 2013; Sriram, 2011). Moreover, even when student affairs practitioners have the training, they may fail to see scholarly engagement as a key part of their field (Jablonski et al., 2006). Investigating the graduate preparation of student affairs professionals as scholar-practitioners provides insight into how to further this key competency.

In the social sciences, research design courses are a formal experience in which students develop skills and identity (Wagner, Garner, & Kawulich, 2011). While students may be taught how to engage in research, the emphasis is often on their individual research projects and interests (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2008). Yet, in student affairs practice, research is often conducted in collaboration with others (Jablonski et al., 2006). Our case study examines the ways in which first-year master’s students and doctoral students experience and navigate participation on research teams as part of a higher education research course. The purpose of this study is to explore how research skills and communities of research can be promoted in student affairs and/or higher education graduate preparation programs through a peer-led, team-based model to support future scholar-practitioners. Specifically, we ask the question: how does involvement in team-based, peer-led research communities influence the development of a scholar-practitioner identity among emerging higher education professionals?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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We center this study in the literature on scholar-practitioner identity as developed through graduate socialization and communities of practice (CoP). Though located within distinct bodies of literature, all three bodies are connected in framing how higher education/student affairs students navigate through graduate education.

### ***SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER IDENTITY***

Higher education and student affairs literature has long examined the tensions between theory and practice (Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000; Sriram & Oster, 2012). One tension centers the idea that although practitioners may want to engage with research, they often face barriers around time, access, and the perceived value of such activities in the field or individual work environments (Sriram & Oster, 2012). A second conflict centers on the perception that research is far removed temporally and pragmatically from the day-to-day challenges practitioners face on the ground (Kezar, 2000). The idea of framing practice and scholarship as a binary often negates the ways in which practitioners use informal theories to support their work with students (Broido, 2011). Reason and Kimball's (2012) model of theory and practice identifies a feedback loop in which the informal theory that shapes a practitioner's experiences is constantly iterative in reframing understandings and knowledge. While such informal theory is foundational, there are also concerns about the individualized context that may be unsubstantiated beyond one's worldview. Finding better ways to interweave theory and context may not only lead to better implementation in the field, but a higher caliber of professionals (Bensimon, 2007; Blimling, 2011). As Kezar (2000) proposes, "the solution for dissolving a socially constructed false dichotomy is to create a new culture, socializing the field to a philosophy that emphasized continuity and mutuality" (p. 464). A recent focus on developing scholar-practitioners that weave together both experience and empirical data may be this solution.

The term scholar-practitioner was defined by Manning as a continuum between scholarship and practice where individuals may land based on interests and experiences (Jablonski et al., 2011). In her framework, professionals in higher education/student affairs take on a range of identities across pure scholars, scholar/practitioners, practitioner/scholars, and pure practitioners. Blimling (2011) modified Manning's model to develop a matrix where scholarship and experience are combined in different amounts, leading to an overall approach deemed as professional judgment. The four styles of integrating theory and practice included reflective-practitioner, experienced-practitioners, scholar-researcher, and scholar-practitioner. In this matrix, "scholar-practitioners are educators with a history of practical experience in student affairs as well as practitioners who actively engage themselves in the creation of knowledge" (Blimling, 2011, p. 47). Scholar-practitioners may use research in a variety of ways, such as using empirical data to improve effectiveness of practice, engaging more directly with emerging findings, and presenting within their communities (Hatfield & Wise, 2015; Kupo, 2014).

Kupo (2014) notes that a cohesive framework in which scholarship and evidence-based practice work together are critical for effective student affairs practice. Focusing on a scholar-practitioner framework in graduate school can help to ensure that administrators guide practice through theory and that scholarship is useful for application (Broido, 2011). A scholar-practitioner identity can be useful for individuals as well. The term implies that continued learning by professionals is crucial for student success, and centers self-reflection for professionals in this process (Hatfield & Wise, 2015). Providing a scholar-practitioner framework can also help to prepare professionals to engage with research, assessment, and evaluation long after their graduate coursework in a way that is often lacking in the field (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). In this study, we examine how an applied peer-led, team-based research project impacts the development of a scholar-practitioner identity.

### ***GRADUATE SOCIALIZATION***

The development of graduate students into professionals within higher education and student affairs occurs through a process known as socialization. Master's and doctoral student tracks are often viewed as pursuing different goals, particularly as the former traditionally prepared students for non-academic careers (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). The process of socialization is multifaceted, occurring across five levels of culture: overall graduate education, institutional, disciplinary, departmental, and individual (Gardner, 2007). These experiences can vary by stage of student, gender, and nationality (Mendoza, 2007; Sallee, 2011; Suspitsyna, 2013).

Weidman et al. (2001) proposed that graduate students move through the socialization process in four stages. In the anticipatory stage, individuals become aware of the expectations. In the formal stage, instruction is provided around the role. In the informal stage, role expectations emerge from peers and other unstructured sources. Finally, individuals form and internalize a new professional identity within the personal stage. Across these stages, mentorship relationships are crucial for student success (Gardner, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Webb, Wangmo, Ewen, Teaster, & Hatch, 2009). Indeed, attrition can happen when the fit between a student and their advisor or department is poor (Boden, Borrego, & Newswander, 2011; Golde, 2005; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Outside of formal relationships, collaborative communities provide interactive environments that help students to think and act independently and critically (Weidman et al., 2001). As such, it is crucial to expand the current literature to look for nuance beyond departmental or faculty relationships to engage with the ways in which peer interactions and team-based learning may provide mentorship and collaboration.

The goal of graduate socialization for doctoral students is to emerge as independent scholars groomed for specific fields (Gardner, 2007; Lovitts, 2008). Doctoral students who are most successful in the transition grow “not only in skill, but in understanding as well. Many of the students mentioned taking a new and active role in their graduate studies, no longer being the passive learners of their undergraduate years” (Gardner, 2007, p. 735). Research has shown that authentic research experiences early in students’ academic programs can help students to gain a sense for their fit with the intellectual work of their discipline (Golde, 2005). This study adds to the literature by examining how master’s students and doctoral students work in team-based environments to develop as scholar-practitioners.

### ***COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COP)***

The idea of communities of research builds upon the concept of communities of practice as sites of collaborative learning and engagement in a university setting. The articles reviewed here take place outside of the United States (e.g., South Africa, New Zealand, the United Kingdom). Schulze (2009) defines CoP as spaces where “knowledge is created, held, and transferred. It is the context in which individuals develop the practices and identities appropriate to that community” (p. 119). Wenger (1998) identified three elements that describe CoP: (a) mutual engagement of participants in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another, (b) joint enterprise which creates relations of mutual accountability among participants, and (c) development of a shared repertoire, including language, conventions and understandings. In a qualitative study focused on CoP, researchers found that the context, culture, and activities are important and influence learning that occurs in CoP (Schulze, 2009). Furthermore, the development of mentees was influenced by the university context, activities, relationships within CoP, and participant dispositions (Schulze, 2009).

Additionally, Green (2005) contends that within communities of practice there are numerous spaces of influence which are part of the learning process that surrounds professional development. The community of practice perspective on learning set forth by Lave and Wenger (1991) characterizes learning as “legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice” (p. 31), where people learn as they move from peripheral involvement “toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (p. 29). The “influential other,” an individual that plays devil’s advocate, challenges peers to critically think, provides reassurance to newcomers, hands over key roles and trusts learners to launch into the task at hand (Green, 2005, p. 296). More specifically within spaces of influence, there are five defined spaces outlined by Green. The first, spaces of action, are where learners are positioned as subjects rather than objects. Participants take control of their learning, make decisions about the ways in which they engage with a given challenge, and push toward shared goals for authentic learning to happen. Second, spaces of explicit discourse are where participants engage in practices that make critical elements of a given problem or learning context clear. For example, learners have opportunities to converse, read, and write. Third, are spaces of learning which provided examples (content-based) in understanding how to work from people’s capabilities and providing a

forum for critical feedback. Fourth are spaces of practice development, which are similar to spaces of learning but provide examples that are practice based and rooted in the ability to understand and work from people's capabilities. In spaces of practice development, participants enjoy doing learning hands-on as a group. Last, in spaces of trust the most important components surround reflexivity and empathy, which refers to safe spaces where risk taking with respect to learning helps contribute and build a community of trust. Overall, successful CoP begin first among the relationships developed by the research team which is based on clear communication, trust, and creating space to allow for knowledge to transfer from collaborative research to practice (Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay, & Siebörger, 2008; Schulze, 2009).

## METHODS

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This project reflects a single descriptive case study that engages both quantitative and qualitative data points (Merriam, 1998). We define the case as the graduate research course and as the site of this study, and treat individual students and instructors as embedded units within the case.

### *RESEARCH SITE AND SAMPLE*

The research site (case) for this study is a research methods course taught within a higher education/student affairs graduate preparation program at a large, public Research-I university in New England. This is a required seminar course for all first-year doctoral and master's students in the program and is taught by one full-time, tenure track faculty member and a doctoral teaching assistant. The course met in-person, once a week for two and half hours over 13 weeks in spring 2016. Students in this course engaged in activities that support learning to understand the process of systematically researching a problem in the field of higher education and how to evaluate, interpret, and implement higher education scholarship. This course was designed to examine how the field of higher education applies research designs and methods to generate new knowledge. The sample is comprised of the course instructor, teaching assistant, and 18 students enrolled in the course. The course enrolled four first-year doctoral students and 14 first-year master's students. As part of the course, students worked on a research team throughout the semester comprised of three or four master's students and led by one doctoral student who acted as the principal investigator (PI; four total).

### *DATA COLLECTION*

Case studies often engage multiple data points to provide a holistic understanding of the case under investigation (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Thus, in our study we collected data in multiple, interrelated ways. While some of the data were part of class assignments or discussion, student participants had the option to opt-in or opt-out of the use of any of their assignments/discussions for this study. Additionally, student participants could opt-in or opt-out of any of the non-assignment based forms of data collection (e.g., interviews, class evaluations) for use in this study.

The data that we collected for this study includes the following: (1) having student participants engage in a research team blog throughout the semester in which they documented and reflected on their experiences engaging in the research process and on a research team. Each research team made at least seven blog posts throughout the semester, with each team member responding at least once to each post. Thirteen students allowed us to use their blog posts for this study, resulting in 154 blog posts/responses that were used as data. (2) Participants engaged in weekly group meetings during the course with members of the class to reflect on the research experience. These meetings were either audio-recorded or the meeting facilitator recorded written notes. (3) Participants participated in one 30-60 minute, audio-recorded individual interview at the conclusion of the course after grades were submitted. The interview session focused on gathering data about the participants' experiences on a research team, their development as a scholar/researcher, and how they see the course fitting within the context of their overall graduate education and professional identity. Twelve students elected to be interviewed for the study. Examples of interview questions included the following: how did par-

ticipation in a peer-led research project influence your experience or conception of yourself as a graduate student; did the team based model influence your connection to peers in the program; and, was there a moment during the semester when you felt more connected to the research process? (4) Participant observation conducted during class sessions that were documented through field notes and memos written by the co-authors of this paper. These observations included descriptions of, and reflections on, course sessions. (5) Written reflections and assignments completed by student participants throughout the academic year. (6) A mid-semester and an end-of-semester electronic Qualtrics survey (likert-scale and open response) focusing on the participants' experience in the course. Seven of the student participants completed these surveys. The survey asked students to comment on such areas as the instructors' organization, preparation, communication, and accessibility. (7) An electronic Qualtrics survey given at the end of the academic semester (likert-scale and open response) focusing on the participants' experience working on a research team. Fifteen of the student participants completed this survey. Examples of survey questions included the following: how often did you feel your team was committed to producing a quality project; to what extent were team members equitably involved in decision making for the research project; and how would you describe your research team's working style?

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

The quantitative data provided by the three Qualtrics surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to look at the frequencies and total percentages of responses based on the sample size. The survey data is used to provide context to the qualitative data around how students saw their scholar-practitioner individual and team identity change over the course of the semester.

The qualitative data (e.g., interview transcripts, blog posts, observation notes, and memos) were analyzed using Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method of case study analysis (modified from Glaser & Strauss' use of constant comparative in grounded theory). Although this approach engages three stages of data analysis, the process itself was iterative and overlapping, which is a characteristic common of qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). For example, the open and axial coding stages occurred concurrently in order to adjust the analysis as new codes and categories were developed.

We began the process by uploading all data to NVIVO 10, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to create a case study database (Merriam, 2009). Next, we read the data multiple times for comparative examination and preliminary analysis/analytic memoing. During this process, we developed a list of inductive and deductive open codes. Inductive analysis was used to remain open to new and emerging themes in the data based upon the research question (Stake, 1995). During this early stage of analysis, documents were openly coded for "data that strike as interesting, potentially relevant, or important" (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). For example, in reading through the interview transcripts, we noted when participants discussed peer engagement throughout their research projects. By identifying sensitizing concepts, a deductive approach was also incorporated (Merriam, 2009). These sensitizing concepts included key themes from the theoretical framework and literature.

Axial coding is the second stage in the constant comparative method approach and involves comparing and connecting emerging codes into categories (Merriam, 2009). We conducted axial coding iteratively during the open coding process and after initial open codes were developed. We used NVIVO 10 to connect data together by open code; by reassembling it, we were able to view and identify patterns and themes in the data (Merriam, 2009). Open codes were connected to five broad categories that comprised recurrent patterns within the data (Merriam, 2009). These five categories are (1) Communities of Practice, (2) Group Dynamics, (3) Perspectives on Learning Research, (4) Role of Research Class, and (5) Student Development and Learning. Next we engaged in selective coding to identify the prominent themes that cut across the case and the core category to address the research question (Merriam, 2009). This led us to the three themes further discussed in the Findings section.

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We first analyzed the individual data points and then compared the major results in the interpretation stage. At this point we found that both forms of data emphasized the growth of participants as researchers and the dynamics they experienced with peers throughout the research process. However, each form of data presents a unique lens to this overarching theme. For example, the quantitative data provides context to overall research teams' progress and growth, while the qualitative data highlights the individual growth of students.

### *DATA QUALITY*

The authors of this paper represent a range of perspectives comparable to those represented within the course, having held roles that spanned course instructor, teaching assistant, doctoral student, and master's student. We were intentional in developing a research team that together could provide a holistic understanding of the course and present multiple positionalities. Positionality "describes the relationship between the researcher and her participants and the researcher and her topic" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 31). To address our own positionality, we engaged in reflexive practices throughout the project such as writing memos during the coding process and discussing differing interpretations across the group (Jones et al., 2006). When we disagreed on the interpretation, we discussed the divergent interpretations as a research team. Our team used extant literature to help guide our decision-making about the interpretation and findings were revised based upon interpretations with which we all agreed. This approach promoted interpretive validity across researchers (Maxwell, 2005) and served as a form of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also engaged in peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by sharing our paper with scholars of graduate socialization to gain external perspective and feedback. For example, we presented our paper at the ACPA annual conference to gain feedback from a scholar discussant with expertise on the topic as well as from audience members.

## **FINDINGS**

Our findings are organized by an initial presentation of quantitative findings that emphasize research team engagement, followed by a presentation of qualitative findings that emphasize individual participant narratives.

### *QUANTITATIVE DATA*

The quantitative data came from the end-of-semester survey to provide holistic context to the project (n=15) and how the students were socialized to develop a scholar-practitioner identity within peer-led research communities. As shown in Table 1, responses to a main question about group dynamics are presented with information regarding the mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum response values.

**Table 1. Ratings of research team progress over time**

Item	Coding	M	SD	Min	Max
Setting realistic goals	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.8	0.91	2	5
Work distribution	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.13	1.02	2	5
Collaboration amongst group members	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.67	1.07	2	5
Confidence and trust in one another's abilities	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.6	1.25	2	5
Communication	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.4	1.2	1	5



Item	Coding	M	SD	Min	Max
Receptivity to feedback	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	3.4	0.8	2	5
Comfort with subject matter	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	4.27	0.68	3	5
Comfort with the research process	1=Greatly diminished 5=Greatly improved	4.2	0.75	3	5

### **QUALITATIVE DATA**

Qualitative data revealed three ways in which participation in peer-led communities of research impacted graduate students' preparation to serve as scholar-practitioners: the importance of a scholar-practitioner orientation within higher education/student affairs, their own development of a scholar-practitioner identity, and the role of peer-to-peer support in navigating the research process. In the following analysis, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Participants**

Doctoral Students/Pis	Master's Students
1. Veronica	1. Kelsey
2. Corey	2. Maria
3. Tina	3. Abigail
4. Alice	4. Dan
	5. Jill
	6. Jody
	7. Ryan
	8. Leslie

### **Scholar-practitioner as a value in the field**

Many participants in this study demonstrated prior knowledge of the call for student affairs professionals to engage with scholarly research (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Hatfield & Wise, 2013; Saunders et al., 2000; Schroeder & Pike, 2001), with several citing it as a reason the class could boost their future career prospects. There seemed to be some differentiation by graduate role (master's versus doctoral) in attitude towards the scholar-practitioner orientation. Doctoral students expressed their views on the importance of research, while master's students expressed a desire to adopt a scholar-practitioner orientation even as they doubted its feasibility in how they could create knowledge within the fast-paced timeline of the semester (Sriram & Oster, 2012).

**Critiques of current attitudes.** With all participants currently holding graduate assistantships or jobs in higher education settings, they brought unique perspectives when reflecting upon the utility and feasibility of acting as scholar-practitioners. Opinions on the acceptability of identifying as a scholar-practitioner in the field tended to fall on a spectrum, ranging from frustration to mere acknowledgement that it is not part of their work culture or the norm (Gardner, 2007). Participants felt that there was a discrepancy between the ways in which the scholar-practitioner identity was promoted but not actually adhered to in the profession. Maria provided an example of this, noting her frustration:

I'm seeing the environments that I'm in in a much more critical way, including how I'm potentially seeing the flaws in what people are doing based on what they assume to be true, based on the literature. And I'm realizing a lot of people who are pretty high up in the institutions that I've been working at don't engage with it in a nuanced way, to a detriment.

Several participants brought up resistance to research-informed practice in their current or former places of employment; one participant called it a “cultural problem” in the student affairs profession overall, while another said that they did not know of any student affairs professionals who would consider or label themselves a scholar-practitioner. From Maria’s perspective as a new professional, many in student affairs are “throwing darts at the wall and then drawing targets around them [...] as opposed to drawing your target and then figuring out how [you are] going to get the dart there.” In different terms, students in the course perceived that some student affairs professionals use literature and research to justify current practices, rather than basing practice on literature and research.

**Desire to integrate research and practice.** Despite these perceived or anticipated barriers to developing a scholar-practitioner identity in the student affairs profession, many master’s level participants stated that they hoped to incorporate research into their work. Alice and Dan pointed out that even if current professionals do not see the value in conducting original research, it is important to know how to analyze and apply research to their work. Dan noted that “if you’re going to be working off best practices it is important to learn how to ... read that research.” Or as Alice stated, “good practitioners know how to interpret research.” Leslie expressed a similar view, but doubted she would be able to incorporate reviewing or conducting research into her practice because such activities are perceived as “taking away time and resources” from duties related directly to her position. In her experience, “a lot administrators are doing this on their own time.” In these ways, there was an acknowledgement that research is important even when it is not done regularly or supported as a central part of one’s job.

Doctoral-level participants expressed more optimism that they would be able to incorporate research into either faculty or administrative positions. Veronica pointed to institutions’ shift towards the “customer service model in education,” where departments must justify budgets and spending through evidence-based practices. From her perspective, many practitioners already conduct informal research: “you’re collecting data, qualitative data, in almost every meeting [they] have with students. And so if [they are] listening for themes of what is going wrong, then [they] try to correct that.” Similarly, Corey stated his belief that research in practice “pushes us to understand the world—how is it changing? Has it changed? Where can we take it? Research positions us to ask questions that we normally wouldn’t otherwise ask ourselves.” Doctoral students were more likely to make these connections between formal and informal research currently being conducted in the field, which emphasized their development towards adopting a scholar-practitioner identity.

### **Scholar-practitioner as an individual identity**

Aside from understanding the importance of a scholar-practitioner orientation within the field of higher education, participants in this study acknowledged the importance of this position within their own practice. Regardless of the degree to which participants identified across the scholar-practitioner spectrum (Jablonski et al., 2006), involvement in a peer-led research project helped participants to confront their assumptions and develop deeper understandings of the potential for scholarship to enhance their education and to complement their everyday practice in student affairs.

**Nuance within graduate roles.** For doctoral students, the idea of scholar-practitioner identity was salient as research is a key part of the graduate role. For the four doctoral students, the experience of leading a research team melded together both elements of research and practice. Tina most explicitly stated this synthesis, sharing that she drew upon skills from her assistantship in student life supervising students to support her in coordinating research team logistics. As she noted, “I had to apply those same (leadership) techniques in some ways, and I guess it worked.” Alice had done independent research prior to the course and identified strongly within the scholarship side of the course. However, the ability to coordinate a research team was a new experience that required her to support a group through the creation of a shared product. Her conception of being a scholar-practitioner changed to a more collaborative approach that helped her to realize “when I have master’s students in my classroom...I have a bit more experience in different stuff, just the research skills.” The doc-

toral students also thought about how being a scholar-practitioner might extend into other research opportunities. In one example, Veronica felt better equipped to engage in collaborative research in future, noting that “I’m better prepared now to be a good team member on a research team in future and as I continue working in a research team.” This even had an impact on possible career paths, such as Corey who shifted his goals so that “by the end [of the course], I was really feeling like neck-and-neck between faculty and admin route.” Thus, not only did doctoral students value a scholar-practitioner identity, but saw themselves fitting into those roles through their leadership in the project.

For master’s students, there was a range of taut experiences in how students initially perceived research as important for their individual success within student affairs. Abigail mentioned that prior to the team-based project, she had experience doing research in the hard sciences. The class broadened her desire to engage in new types of research within the social sciences. After the group project, she noted, “I really want to do graduate-level higher education research. Since this class I’ve sought out opportunities to do that and am considering, maybe, looking at [doctoral] programs in two years when I graduate.” She went on to share a recent job search in which she actively looked for possible opportunities to engage in research, gravitating towards positions that were open to incorporating scholarship into practice. Several students explicitly spoke about how the course fueled thoughts around their engagement in future doctoral studies where they could gain further foundations as scholars. However, there was also a sense of increased interest in the research process for its own merit and ability to inform good practice. One participant shared a connection between the class and her newfound appreciation of how research can apply to practice within higher education:

I have learned a lot about the research process and I can actually participate in conversations about research with confidence. Today, I attended an [event name] and I was impressed with myself in understanding the researcher. He was using jargon and language that prior to the research class I would not have understood.

In this way, for both masters and doctoral students made connections across research and practice to cultivate a growing awareness of their scholar-practitioner identity within their peer-led communities of practice.

**Self-awareness and confidence.** Multiple participants expressed that participation in the course helped them to understand how they approached the research process. Although challenging, working in a research team helped students to learn to collaboratively develop and apply research as scholar-practitioners. Students’ entries in the research blogs reflected their ability to discuss and apply concepts from the course to the research project, including paradigms, methodological fit, and ethical considerations. Having a hands-on experience was key to this development. One participant noted that “I feel very comfortable conducting research now. This was a hard class and it had a lot of work involved, but it was such a good way for me to understand how research works.” Another described the course as almost an induction into the world of scholarship, sharing that “knowing the basics of student life research helps me feel comfortable utilizing the academic lingo required to conduct and present research to others.” The induction into scholarship allowed the graduate students to be socialized into research and academia norms and increased their self-awareness and confidence to be both practitioners and scholars.

Moreover, there was a sense that participants gained familiarity with the types of concrete skills they might need moving forward. Across data sources, participants identified areas in which they had grown and those that they needed to continue to focus. For Veronica, leading a research team confirmed her desire to focus on the nuances of different types of the methods moving forward: “I still need more reading in different kinds and types of ways to put together research for whatever your questions are, but I think it helped further refine like my ideas of like critical qualitative or transformative project or just thinking about the paradigms.” Another student described feeling a bit uncomfortable doing in-person interviews, and the idea that different research designs were more com-

fortable. During the research process, students had specific roles that allowed them to focus and hone in on specific skills and develop key scholar competencies. One participant shared that “I’m still not very comfortable in my ability to write literature reviews, as I struggle when it comes to finding a balance between summary/analysis. I feel comfortable writing the methods section though.”

**Impact on future goals.** Participants in this study expressed that the peer-led research project in conjunction with the other elements of the course helped to expose them to new possibilities or re-affirmed prior goals. Even if the students expressed that they did not want to do research in the future, most felt comfortable with the research process and able to move forward in similar circumstances. Many master’s students in the course felt as though a doctoral program might be more feasible for them in future based on this research experience. In an open survey response, one participant shared, “I think that it has primed me to engage with the research process in a much more realistic way. It made the reality of what a doctoral program looks like, because that’s what your committee is going to be doing, that’s what your group is doing. It made it tangible.” Maria described this as building muscle memory that she could use in future research.

I know I want to do a dissertation someday, but I—and that’s one reason why I chose this program—but I don’t think it was until this class that it made it tangible and accessible to me. It’s one thing to listen to piano—this is a really dumb analogy—but to listen to piano and learn about how to play a piano, and learn the cords, learn the philosophy behind the notes and everything like that. It’s another thing to have the muscle memory of that, and it just makes you much better at writing music, at understanding how someone write the music, and all that stuff.

In many ways, the course created opportunities for questions and reflection around the idea of a scholar-practitioner identity and helped students to re-examine their own goals and fit as they developed along their career trajectory.

While the doctoral students already identified research as a priority in their graduate programs prior to the course, the PI experience helped them consider different approaches for future studies. Veronica and Corey most clearly demonstrated new opportunities arising through the course for their future practice. For Veronica, there were new opportunities to engage in collaborative research at a strictly peer level. As she noted, “I think being on a research team at this, at the graduate level made me realize that I can do it also at the graduate level with other fellow graduates than always having to have faculty members leading it.”

Corey shared a deeply transformative experience. He described coming in as a novice and leaving the course as a self-identified researcher and budding scholar.

I say I want to be a researcher, but I haven’t even hatched yet, I’m still inside this egg. I felt like I was learning to walk, to take steps, it felt like initially I was in the earliest stages, still in an egg, but by the end I felt like I was fully—like I was fully able to walk. The actual course allowed me to hatch, it allowed me to take my first steps, learn how to crawl, learn how to walk and finally stand on my own.

If doctoral students are expected to develop as independent researchers (Lovitts, 2008), it is beneficial to note that the team-based model provided both independent and collaborative opportunities for growth and development.

### **Peer-to-peer support**

Throughout the semester long research course, the role of peer-to-peer support illuminated how students navigated the research process and managed group dynamics. For the doctoral students, this was the first time they were overseeing a research team in a leadership role. Veronica, Corey, Tina, and Alice quickly noted the importance of their role in the team and how the team members looked to them for reassurance and support. Tina shared that “after a couple of meetings only, I realized

that they were looking towards me actually to kind of provide them the guidance because that's how they were role defined." Moreover, Veronica chose to use her new role to set up communication and expectations for her team. For instance, she stated:

I set the standard of communication with them in the way of every class that we met, every week that we met, I would set out to do for everybody to give them a sense of what they were accomplishing this week and what I was expecting of them to keep us moving forward. So a lot of my initial communication with them was just being really, really good with email and ... setting the tone.

Similarly, Corey was interested in providing structure for his team and creating an equal division of labor. He emphasized that he "didn't want one student to have to put in a disproportionate amount of hours, and if they were, they agreed that this week would be a heavier week for them, and the next would be a lighter week for them." However, Alice came into the project feeling a bit more confident and excited to be a PI as she had previous experiences of being on a research team. Alice said:

It was nice to have a different role and I never had that role in a research project, really. That was nice. It was very different from collaborating with equal peers I felt, because I think that normally I don't take that much of a leading role. I was never aware of that, but now I realize I really had to change my normal behavior to fill that role of PI in this group.

While the project was set up with clear expectations, it was not too long before challenges transpired amongst the members of the peer-led research teams.

**Team challenges.** Overall, each of the four teams discussed instances wherein the research process was demanding. One team particularly mentioned that the most challenging aspect of the research team project was getting everyone to communicate effectively and reach consensus, noting that "most of the disagreements surrounded stylistic choices and how to implement or write something." In a similar vein, due to the ongoing demands and fast-paced nature of a thirteen-week semester, another obstacle one participant stated, "I think one of the more challenging aspects would be time as it was just impossible at times to get together in person." Likewise, all of research teams agreed that meeting in-person was the best way to explicitly communicate with one another, but also proved to be useful in partnering and sharing responsibility in their research team roles. Other participants mentioned that they struggled during the semester with different aspects of the research process. For instance, Leslie explained she struggled with processing the literature because it was a huge amount of data to process. Despite these challenges, participants resolved disagreements within their teams in order to meet deadlines and to advance their research projects.

**Letting go of structure.** As the weeks continued during the semester, the dynamics of the four teams changed. The teams' dynamics demonstrated their learning and growth through submitted group assignments in which the instructors and PIs provided quick feedback. Ryan shared that his team had decent chemistry, noting "I just think that fact that all four of us were willing to cooperate and you know stick with each other and when getting frustrated not getting mad at the person you know you let it go or take it out on something else so just yeah the personalities working well together." Over time, team members increasingly trusted one another and stepped in to assist others when needed. Despite the challenges during the research process, the peer-led teams overcame obstacles and built trust to successfully complete their research studies. One participant described their experience with this process:

I felt like just the nature of being on the team I was interacting with people and learning about their lives and things that were going on for them beyond class or this specific class or just school in general. And I felt like and I shared things with them that were going on in my life outside of the classroom. So I definitely felt like we acted as support systems for each other.

Not only did the teams mention that the research process and peer support created a transformative and rewarding experience, but one participant noted that:

[The experience provided a] strong sense of unity around our topic and the positive dynamics among the group made it so that there was plenty of time to address some of the tougher aspects such as discussing our conceptual framework, discussing the nature of oppression that was central to our study, and ask each other questions that would move us forward.

Further confirming the influential role of the PI in the peer-lead teams, one of the participants stated, “as time went on, I learned that she [the PI] is really a motivator -- she is not going to just do all the work, but will try to inspire us to take ownership of our project and be proud of our individual contributions.” By renegotiating expectations, teams created spaces of trust, action, and learning in which to work together and develop their scholar-practitioner identities (Schulze, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

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In our findings, we articulate the ways in which professional roles are framed and internalized through peer relationships in a higher education/student affairs graduate program. These findings suggest the idea of tension between the value of a scholar-practitioner role and practice, the difference in perceptions across masters and doctoral students, and the expansion of communities of practice literature to a graduate socialization and research context.

### *SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER DISCREPANCIES*

Although there is an emerging emphasis on a spectrum of scholar-practitioner identity for professionals within higher education/student affairs (Blimling, 2011; Jablonski et al., 2011), many of the participants in our study saw scholar and practitioner roles as distinctive and dichotomous in their practice. As individuals, students valued scholar-practitioner approaches for their own goals, knowledge, and practice. However, even as participants experienced individual growth in their self-efficacy as scholar-practitioners, the feasibility of such an approach remained elusive. There was a sense that to be a scholar-practitioner, something else would need to be eliminated. In this way, these roles were seen to exist in a binary. These findings align with prior scholarship on the obstacles that practitioners face in engaging with research regarding the time commitment, access to, and perceived value of such activities (Sriram & Oster, 2012). Even as graduate students, participants noted this tension in the challenge to balance the demands of their work experiences through jobs and assistantships with the focus on research in the course.

For higher education/student affairs graduate students, there is a clear discrepancy between the value of being a scholar-practitioner and its perceived feasibility. In this study, we did not define the term scholar-practitioner for participants. As such, it is possible that the participants focused on more formalized dimension of scholarship and not the myriad ways in which individuals may encompass scholar-practitioner viewpoints (Kupo, 2014). It is likely that the students in our study are engaging in working theories and using them to inform their practice (Broido, 2011; Reason & Kimball, 2012). However, they may not view the connections of these informal theories and meaning making to formalized research and scholarship. Thus, there may be a canonical sense of who can be a scholar that continues to pervade and deter individuals from embracing such identity at the graduate level. Helping graduate students to see themselves within a scholar-practitioner dynamic is not only important for the development of a high caliber of professionals, but for individual advancement and success.

To create such a synthesis, graduate programs need to work in tandem with professional experiences to role model for students the development of cohesive scholar-practitioner identities. Departments are the vehicle through which students are socialized into the norms of the field of higher education and student affairs (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). However, it is possible that there is a misalignment between the field and the emphases within various graduate preparation programs. A key goal of

student affairs has long been “the application of learning rather than knowledge acquisition” (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008, p. 324). Sriram and Oster (2012) found that, opposed to the idea that scholarship may be a crucial component for career advancement, graduate students are already more engaged with research being produced than professionals further along in their field. They advocate that “there needs to be a culture that encourages and demands research competencies from professionals” (p. 391). The field of higher education and student affairs may be in a period of transition in which the culture is changing in a way that is not yet embodied within individual institutions, workplaces, or professionals. As graduate socialization happens across multiple levels—graduate education, institutional culture, disciplinary culture, departmental culture, and individual culture (Gardner, 2007)—there may be changes happening within different spheres that do not yet influence the whole.

The tension between scholar-practitioner value and feasibility was most evident for the master’s students in our study. Previous scholarship has emphasized that graduate students are socialized in different ways (Weidman et al., 2001), a finding echoed in our case study. The doctoral students in our research entered their studies the expectation that they would be scholars and engaged in independent research. As a result, the experience of leading a research team helped the students to deepen their understanding and to solidify the ways in which practice and scholarship worked together in their own experience. In this way, the team-based research project posted a different framework from Lovitts (2008), who explored the transition to independent researchers. In our study, the transition for doctoral students was not to serve merely as independent scholars but as leaders within the research process. Moreover, doctoral students in our study moved not only from passive to active learners, but from passive to active producers of knowledge (Gardner, 2007).

### ***COMMUNITIES OF RESEARCH***

Findings from this study suggest that peer-led communities of practice create an important contribution to the development of researcher identity and strengthen the skill sets needed for graduate students to develop as scholar-practitioners. This study adds an important contribution by using a CoP model within the United States, as much of the literature reviewed the studies were conducted in South Africa (Hodgkinson-Williams et al., 2008; Schulze, 2009), the U.K. (Ng & Pemberton, 2013), and Australia (Green, 2005). Our peer-led communities of research demonstrated the three elements of CoP by Wenger (1998). In the first, mutual engagement of participants in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another, our study shows how participants developed awareness and confidence to view themselves as scholar-practitioners. For master’s students, this development allowed them to gain a sense of and appreciation for their own capacity to do research. For doctoral students, the negotiation occurred through the process of leading a research team to a completed product and of serving as the “influential other” to manage multiple roles, engages in active listening, and problem solves for the team (Green, 2005, p. 296).

Secondly, Wegner (1998) emphasized the use of a joint enterprise which creates relations of mutual accountability among participants. In the team-based research project, participants had to learn to let go and trust one another to complete the final task, which demonstrated their spaces of learning. While master’s students showed spaces of explicit discourse by embracing the research roles that they were given, where the Primary Investigators (doctoral students) created spaces of action by balancing their roles in delegating and encouraging their team (Green, 2005).

Finally, CoP emphasizes the development of a shared repertoire, including language, conventions, and understandings. In our study, participants noted forming a shared research product built from team collaboration and cumulative input through spaces of trust. Although often forced to navigate through challenges during the research project (spaces of practice development), these groups showed gains in developing team expectations and accountability for one another and in their respective roles (Green, 2005). While the PIs played a large role in leading efforts to form these expectations in our study, all team members played a role in developing their community.

As with understandings of scholar-practitioner roles, doctoral students had a different experience here than master's students. As PIs, doctoral students served as the influential other to help peers think critically, play devil's advocate, provide reassurance, and delegate work (Green, 2005; Schulze, 2009). Doctoral students also played roles in formal (to research) and informal (to program) socialization for master's students into their roles (Weidman et al., 2001). These peer relationships provided support and mentoring across the projects, but also within the larger higher education/student affairs graduate program. Peer roles may provide an important location of socialization that is largely unexamined. Higher education programs "often lack the size, funding, and notoriety of presence to maintain low faculty-student ratios, control the funding necessary for large cohorts of funded graduate assistants, and to be seen as critical elements in the arena of graduate education" (Miller & Deggs, 2012, p. 24). Peer mentorship may be one vehicle through which socialization into a scholar-practitioner role is made feasible as doctoral students see this spectrum within their work and can help to support master's students in developing a similar identity.

## CONCLUSION

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Future research can continue to explore how students develop within peer communities or prioritize scholar-practitioner identity across multiple roles within higher education/student affairs. Research shows that CoP serve as spaces where "knowledge is created, held, and transferred. It is the context in which individuals develop the practices and identities appropriate to that community" (Green, 2005, p. 119). In our study, the participants developed relationships of accountability within their teams, which built trust, and created the foundations for a scholar-practitioner identity. While the concept of a community of practice means to be fully engaged in a task or profession (Schulze, 2009), future research can continue to focus on the ways in which graduate students engage in these communities within the broader classroom or even graduate program. As CoP articulates the context, culture, and activities are important and influence learning that occurs (Schulze, 2009), understanding the how these develop across the spectrum of graduate socialization levels (Gardner, 2007) may help to better understand the ways in which these communities form.

An important addition to this study would be to continue to engage with individuals longitudinally to examine how these courses influence the long-term development of professionals in the field. A final suggestion includes interviewing individuals that supervise new professionals within higher education/student affairs to examine the ways in which they perceive, foster, or role model a scholar-practitioner identity. If there is a disconnect between graduate preparation programs and the work of professionals in the field, such interviews may help to illuminate any discrepancies and create suggestions for better cohesion.

Our findings lead us to echo calls for increased support for professionals who wish to become scholar-practitioners with other studies that demonstrate of research among student affairs professionals (Bensimon, 2007; Hatfield & Wise, 2013; Kezar, 2000; Sriram, 2011; Sriram & Oster, 2012). This future generation of professionals, represented by the master's and doctoral students in our study, expressed a desire to take on the scholar-practitioner identity, but were also uncertain about the extent to which research is currently valued. By making more time and space in the student affairs profession, whether spending fifteen minutes reading research (Sriram, 2011) or subjecting current evaluation and assessment activities to a more rigorous, empirical standard (Kezar, 2000), work environments can better support emerging professionals in engaging in scholar-practitioner roles. Additionally, higher education graduate preparation programs, whether focused on research or practice, should evaluate current research training and course requirements to examine whether they are truly preparing students to meet the ACPA/NASPA (2010) assessment, evaluation, and research competency when they enter the profession. As our study illustrates, incorporating purposeful connections between students' professional experiences/interests and classroom learning is key to sustaining student engagement and interest in developing their scholar-practitioner identities.



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## BIOGRAPHIES

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