

Work Orientation of Graduate Assistants

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Abstract. Completing a graduate assistantship (GA) is one key experience that can provide both work experience and socialization to a career as well as provide financial assistance in exchange for services. This qualitative study explored the motivation of GAs through an “orientation to work” lens. The findings show that GAs exhibit a high extrinsic motivation (positive or negative) toward their work, and graduate administrative assistants exhibit a higher positive intrinsic motivation to work than graduate teaching assistants or graduate research assistants.

Keywords: Graduate assistant, teaching assistant, research assistant, higher education.

1 Introduction

Graduate school offers opportunities to develop professional knowledge, skills, and future career goals. Completing a graduate assistantship is one key experience that can provide both work experience and socialization to a career (Austin, 2002) as well as provide financial assistance in exchange for services (Flora, 2007). In 2013 there were 355,916 graduate students employed in graduate assistantships, representing 9.3% of the total staff at all higher education degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2013). Therefore, graduate assistants (GAs) are an integral part of most research institutions and play a vital role in the teaching and research missions of universities.

The limited literature on graduate assistants has focused on the roles and potential outcomes of the positions. There is some work on the motivations of graduate students to take GA positions and for institutions to hire GAs, however there is little to understand or explain the day-to-day motivations of the GAs from their own experience. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore GA perceptions of their work.

2 Graduate Assistant Literature

The literature on GAs is within the context of graduate education as there cannot be GAs without students enrolled in graduate programs. The relationship of the GA and the institution depends on the type of GA position, the specific tasks of the position, the supervision, and the institutional motivations to hire GAs.

There are three distinct types of GA positions (Flora, 2007). The first, graduate administrative assistants (GAAs), hold assignments in academic, student affairs, or the general university administration offices. The variety of tasks is broad and may require varying levels of supervision of others (Flora, 2007; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). The second is the graduate teaching assistant (GTA). GTAs generally report to a supervising faculty member and may either assist with a large class or teach an undergraduate class as the instructor of record (Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Flora, 2007). Finally, graduate research assistants (GRAs) work with a faculty or lab supervisor on research, but again may have varying levels of supervision and responsibility (Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Flora, 2007).

GA positions are frequently cast as an apprenticeship for a future academic career (Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Sims, & Denecke, 2003). The value of a GAA position includes the development of professional skills and identity to help them in their future careers (Haley, Hephner LaBanc, & Koutas, 2011; Perna & Hudgins, 1996), while GTAs gain valuable teaching skills, especially

if they are intensely trained (Pentecost, Langdon, Asirvatham, Robus, & Parson, 2012), adequately supervised (Gaff, et al., 2003), mentored in their teaching practice (Gilmore, Maher, Felddon, & Timmerman, 2014), or have opportunities for professional development (Gallego, 2014). The value to the student in a GRA position is a close interaction with faculty and a convenient peer group (Perna & Hudgins, 1996). All GA positions are intended to provide a lessening of the financial burden of graduate school (Perna & Hudgins, 1996), however, there is evidence that GAs are viewed as cheap labor for the institution (Slaughter, Campbell, Holleman, & Morgan, 2002). There is also a question from both a legal perspective and a practice perspective about whether the GA role is educational in nature or whether GAs are employees and therefore representatives of the institution (Flora, 2007).

In some cases, GAs may not be regarded as professionals, even though they bring valuable experience and expertise to their positions (Perna & Hudgins, 1996), and are treated as just student workers and gain little from the experience that will help in their future careers (Haley, et al., 2011). Earlier research also found that GTAs perceive fewer gains in professional development than GRAs, although the study looked primarily at research skill development (Ethington & Pisani, 1993).

3 Theoretical Framework

Orientation to work is one way to understand the experience of graduate assistants and their motivation for continuing in their roles. Orientation to work is defined as tendencies among individuals to value various types of incentives from their work environment (Caldwell, O'Reilly, & Morris, 1983). Caldwell et al. (1983) provide two types of work orientation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Individuals with intrinsic orientations value intellectual fulfillment, creative self-expression, and task mastery in their work, while extrinsically oriented individuals primarily view work as a means to attaining monetary rewards and look for reinforcements outside the work itself.

In a synthesis of work orientation literature Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994) identified five elements of intrinsic motivation (self-determination, competence, task involvement, curiosity, and interest) and five elements of extrinsic motivation (evaluation concerns, recognition concerns, competition concerns, a focus on money or other tangible incentives, and a focus on the dictates of others). These definitions of work orientation are useful in the graduate assistant context because their work frequently relates to their future career goals, but in a unique "student" structure of higher education. The primary research questions emerged from the perceptions about the tasks and roles of GA positions found in the literature and viewed through the lens of motivation. Through what orientations to work do GAs view their work? Is there a difference in work orientation based on GA type?

4 Methodology

In a field of inquiry with few clear answers, exploring the experience of individuals is the preferred methodological approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Therefore a qualitative analysis is required to hear individual voices rather than a snapshot of the aggregate. This article is based on the open-ended answers of a larger study that included both quantitative and qualitative survey questions.

The larger, original study was administered to help answer institutional questions about the perceptions of "fairness" and "consistency" between GA positions. While the initial report for the university addressed the requested "snapshot" about GA perceptions, it appeared that there were other questions that could be answered by the data. The qualitative data (open-ended questions) were analyzed for this article.

4.1 Instrument

The survey instrument was developed by the office of graduate studies at a large, urban, research university and designed to assess graduate assistant perception of work tasks, time spent on tasks, skills gained, and value of the GA position. The survey was administered to all graduate assistants at the

study site via Qualtrics, an online survey system. A total of 286 useable surveys were returned for a 34.3% response rate.

The original survey resulted in both quantitative and qualitative data, however, this article is based on secondary data analysis of a subset of the total data collected, primarily the open-ended questions (91 open-ended responses, 31.8% of respondents) and GA type. This type of analysis is viable when the goals of the research match the data collected (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

4.2 Participants

The full survey asked participants to report their GA type. Of the 286 useable responses, 21 students noted multiple roles or positions (2 or 3), which resulted in a total of 318 positions used in the analyses. The response rates of the three types of positions by school are aligned with the total number of GAs in the university population. The largest group of participants (liberal arts and sciences) is also the largest group in the population. Participants were most likely to be GTAs, followed by GRAs, and significantly fewer GAAs

Table 1. Location and type of GA position.

	GAA	GRA	GTA	Total	Population
Administration, Student Affairs, or Enrollment Management	16	2	0	18	53
Business Administration	1	3	0	4	19
Education	3	1	1	5	14
Engineering & Computer Science	1	20	10	31	139
Fine & Performing Arts	0	2	1	3	35
Liberal Arts and Sciences	5	41	85	131	385
Social Work	0	7	1	8	29
University Studies	1	0	12	13	53
Urban Studies & Planning/Government	7	19	9	35	93
Unknown (missing)	13	26	31	70	--
Total	47	121	150	318	833

All participants had an opportunity to provide answers to open-ended questions about their experience and 91 responded (31.8% of respondents). Comments were disassociated from location of the GA position, while keeping the type of GA position in order to maintain anonymity. By disaggregating GA perspectives into GAA, GRA and GTA positions, attention can be focused on the differences and similarities between the positions, as each type has different tasks and benefits (Haley et al., 2011; Perna & Hudgins, 1996; Gaff et al., 2003).

4.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process. Because we were asking a different research question from the original project, we began with open coding (Saldana, 2009). The researchers coded the responses, compared for consistencies, and developed themes with a high degree of inter-rater reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through a process of discussion and a return to the literature, the team drew upon the concepts of "orientation to work" as a way to describe themes emerging from the data. Magnitude and structural coding that included frequency counts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009), led to a form of hypothesis testing (Bernard, 2006; Saldana, 2009) and resulted in the development of a matrix to summarize qualitative analysis of ordinal survey data (Saldana, 2009). We then completed the testing of the matrix to determine patterns in the data and used the matrix as an organizational tool to present the perceptions of the participants.

4.4 Researchers and Limitations

The research team included three faculty members who teach and advise graduate students, and one graduate student (since graduated). As professionals in higher education we all value growth and development as outcomes for higher education experiences and have a bias toward the GA position as a growth opportunity. Using secondary data controlled for our biases. Due to the specific nature of the site institution (urban-serving, large, regional), there are limits to the generalizability of the study to other institutional types. However, there is a sense of applicability as many institutions award GA positions and depend on the services provided by GAs.

5 Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the graduate assistant experience as it relates to their orientation to work. Analysis of narrative responses from 91 participants resulted in a matrix of work orientation (intrinsic or extrinsic) by GA type (GAA, GRA, GTA), and two major findings. Table 2 represents all participant comments (multiple comments per participant), reported as percentages. An extrinsic orientation was identified when a comment reflected concerns about evaluation, recognition, and competition, a focus on money, or the dictates of others (Amabile et al., 1994). An intrinsic orientation was identified when a comment reflected self-determination, competence, task involvement, curiosity, or interest (Amabile et al., 1994). The comment was also labeled as positive (satisfied) or negative (dissatisfied).

Table 2. Matrix of GA type and extrinsic versus intrinsic orientation (% of responses)

	GAA	GRA	GTA
Extrinsic (positive)	10.5%	16.7%	6.9%
Extrinsic (negative)	58.0%	63.3%	55.2%
Intrinsic (positive)	26.3%	6.7%	10.3%
Intrinsic (negative)	5.3%	13.3%	27.6%

The process of tallying the responses resulted in two primary findings. GAs reported a highly extrinsic orientation to the GA position that was heavily weighted toward the negative. In addition, there were differences by GA type, primarily around intrinsic orientation.

5.1 GA Comments Reflect a Negative Extrinsic Orientation

GAs' extrinsic orientations were expressed as either appreciation for the opportunity to fulfill their extrinsically motivated needs or disappointment that these positions are not designed to meet these needs. The negative comments outweighed those that expressed appreciation for the financial support of a GA position. For example, one GRA stated that "Assistantships are practically designed to drive graduate students to penury. Nobody can do serious research relying on assistantships, please adjust them to meet the cost of living" (GRA). Another said, "You should cover the health insurance for GAs!!" (GTA).

Several respondents, particularly the GTAs, reported inconsistencies in hours or pay between positions: "Teaching assistantships vary widely in the amount of time required to fulfill though all students in the department have the same FTE" (GTA). There were issues with the type and amount of work and how it is compensated: "I independently teach a class for my assistantship and I far surpass the number of hours I am supposed to work. Teaching a course is not the same as being a teaching assistant and funding/hour allocations should reflect this" (GTA).

Other extrinsic concerns included administrative processes, consistency, and oversight. "The administrative processes (financial) that come along with a GRA have been very frustrating" (GRA). The issue of consistency appeared to be a common concern for GTAs as noted by this response, "There is great need for a better communication system regarding tuition remission and stipends for GA work. Each position is different and it would be helpful if GAs knew exactly what to expect, benefit-wise"

(GTA). Finally, the issue of oversight was identified by all groups: “There should be a better or more regular check-in process overseeing how departments use their Graduate Assistants” (GAA); “Assistantships tend to be very inconsistent from week to week and supervisor to supervisor with little standardization” (GRA).

Extrinsic orientation concerns cut across all GA types, although the GRAs comments reflected the highest extrinsic orientation (80.0%), followed by GAAs (68.5%) and GTAs (62.1%). The negative extrinsic orientation comments focused on issues of pay, time, role expectations, and supervision. Extrinsic work orientation can be equated to work as a means to an end, whether it is from an individual perspective or an institutional perspective. The data from this study indicates a high individual extrinsic work orientation focused on pay, benefits, and evaluation, which is consistent with the definitions summarized by Amabile (1994).

5.2 Intrinsic Motivation Comments Varied by GA Type

GAA comments reflected a substantially more positive intrinsic orientation to their positions (26.3%) than GRAs (6.7%) or GTAs (10.3%). The GAA intrinsic responses focused on their experience as a learning opportunity. For example, “It has been a great experience so far. I am learning a lot and becoming more confident in my field before I even graduate.” Another explicitly connected the GAA position to future work: “My experience has been more than I hoped for. I am able to do really great work for the university that I value on a personal level, while developing my professional skills and defining career goals.”

GTA comments reflected a substantially more negative intrinsic orientation (27.6%) than GRAs (13.3%) or GAAs (5.3%). GTAs were looking for more help in planning for and teaching their courses as there appeared to be a real desire to improve their practice. One commented about initial preparation: “More orientation and training for lab TAs specifically would be helpful. Little preparation to do what is essentially teaching your own course. More tools for grading and rubrics too.” Another response went further to include feedback: “A scarcity of training and support, and limited orientation as to the practical expectations of the job. I felt I was asked to do a lot of trial-by-fire learning with very little experience and almost no observation or feedback.”

Intrinsic work orientation can be aligned to career or professional development. The data from this study reflect a focus on the opportunities to learn and develop skills (consistent with Amabile et al., 1994). The GAA positions were heavily weighted toward student affairs, where students were working in roles directly tied to future careers. Their comments reflected a positive orientation and satisfaction with the GAA role and opportunities to develop. GTAs also had a significant focus on intrinsic orientation, but didn’t feel supported to develop their skills and confidence. GRAs did not have the same level of intrinsic orientation and did not appear to connect their current GRA role to their future career options.

6 Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

The value of using the motivation lens was evident in answering the research questions of orientation to work and GA-type differences. GAs exhibited strong extrinsic motivations in describing their work, which correlates with the literature about one of the primary purposes of GA positions—financial support. If students do not feel they are supported, then the “go to” response may be to forget their intrinsic motivations. The second aspect of extrinsic motivation in the data was lack of supervision or feedback. Many GTAs did not get the kind of supervision or mentoring needed for a successful teaching experience. This is consistent with the literature that describes challenges to train and supervise GTAs (Gaff, et al., 2003; Gallego, 2014; Gilmore et al., 2014; Pentecost et al., 2012).

Even though GA positions have been ostensibly designed as an apprenticeship experience (Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Gaff, et al., 2003), not all graduate students have a goal of working in the academy. They may not make the connections between their GA positions and personal or professional development, and therefore do not view the work through an intrinsic lens. The GAAs, especially those in student affairs, were planning on careers in higher education administration. They had more of a positive, intrinsic perspective of their work than GTAs or GRAs and exhibited an understanding that they were developing professionally (Haley, Hephner LaBanc, & Koutas, 2011; Perna & Hudgins, 1996).

Based on the data and analysis, there are three implications for practice: communication, learning outcomes, and support and feedback. Clear communication is the answer to many problems and is fundamental to an effective organization; therefore, GAs need clear expectations in order to meet their extrinsic orientation needs. This includes a detailed job announcement with descriptions of both expectations and benefits; clearly defined work tasks, expectations, and administrative processes; and ongoing assessment of progress. Providing campus-wide coordination for GAs may also contribute to accountability of both supervisors and GAs.

Connecting job descriptions and expectations to learning and professional development goals reflects an institutional commitment to GAs and their development as future professionals. Professional development plans for GAs would not only assist in meeting individual intrinsic orientation needs, but would also shift some of the focus away from extrinsic orientations. However, connecting positions to learning goals and developing individual development plans are not enough, the department or institution must also support individual learning goals through support and feedback. Helping GAs to view their positions as professional development and creating pathways to focus on intrinsic needs can be addressed through workshops on teaching or observing a GTA in the classroom and providing feedback; giving a GAA an opportunity to lead a program and provide feedback; or allowing a GRA to write a section of research on their own and providing feedback. Support to GAs through sessions connecting their transferable skills to future careers is particularly important if they do not plan to work on a university campus.

Future research to determine correlations between faculty work orientations and GA work orientations across a university and between universities would provide useful information. Perhaps GAs are only reflecting the work environment of the academy. In addition, interviews with GAs could help determine if extrinsic motivation is the “go to” response on a survey and masks the underlying intrinsic motivations.

As a one-institution study, the results may be skewed based on specific institutional culture; however, using an orientation to work lens provided a means to think about individual perspectives of the GA role. If GAs are focused on extrinsic issues, then they gain little from their experiences beyond an aversion to bureaucracy. Creating a culture of learning for all our students, including graduate students in GA positions, reinforces our commitment to education and the future of the academy.

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