Transformational Learning Through a Success Coaching Graduate Assistantship Experience: A Qualitative Case Study

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Transformational Learning Through a Success Coaching Graduate Assistantship Experience: A Qualitative Case Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Education and Social Work
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Education

By
Rita Patel Eng
May 2022

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Dedication

I am grateful to Lord Swaminarayan for giving me the strength and courage to take on this journey.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my parents, Dr. Vishnu and Virbala Patel, who have been my champions all my life. Your love and support, in so many ways, mean so much to me. You have demonstrated what hard work and dedication to your family look like, and I thank you for inspiring and encouraging me to complete this degree. I want to thank my husband Howard for his unconditional love and support as I spent countless weekends with my doctoral work. You picked up the slack and reassured me when I hit those valleys. I am so thankful for you! I want to thank my children Tashi and Tara for their support and for reminding me of my own words when I needed to hear “remember that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.” Lastly, I want to thank my brother, Dr. Sanjay Patel, who inspired me to go for it!
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Finally, I would like to thank my participants for giving me their time and sharing their thoughts on their graduate student experiences. This study would not have been possible without them. I am grateful for the time I had with them during their graduate work and proud of the work they are doing as young professionals in their respective fields.
Abstract

This study examines the impact that graduate assistantships in Success Coaching had on graduate students’ professional practice as they entered their respective employment areas as entry-level professionals. I interviewed a total of 11 participants who were now entry-level working professionals in their respective fields of study, and who had completed at least one semester as a master’s degree graduate assistant in a Success Coaching Center. The qualitative semi-structured interviews focused on graduate student skills, transformational learning, and growth (self-authorship). Participants identified skills that made their transition into the workforce smoother, shared their challenges, and shed light on the transformational growth they experienced. Participants reported their Success Coaching experience to be valuable as they learned and applied skills that helped them navigate challenges through their graduate and post-graduation journey. Participants experienced transformational learning and progressed in their self-authorship as part of their learning partnership as Success Coaches. Implications for research, practice, and policy are examined.

Keywords: graduate assistantship, success coaching, learning partnership model, self-authorship theory
Table of Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................... ix

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Academic Success Coaching ..................................................................................................................... 3

Purpose of Study ....................................................................................................................................... 4

Rationale for Study .................................................................................................................................... 5

Problem Statement ..................................................................................................................................... 7

Research Questions ................................................................................................................................. 8

Significance of Study ................................................................................................................................. 8

Significance of Methods ............................................................................................................................ 10

Positionality .............................................................................................................................................. 11

Summary .................................................................................................................................................. 13

Chapter 2 .................................................................................................................................................. 15

History and Growth of Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education ................................................. 15

The Complexity of Higher Education Institutions .................................................................................. 15

Classifications of Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education ............................................................ 16

Role of Student Affairs Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education ............................................... 17

Graduate Student Role in Higher Education ............................................................................................ 18

Challenges With Graduate Assistantships ............................................................................................... 18
Benefits of Graduate Assistantships ................................................................. 23

History of Coaching ............................................................................................ 25

Coaching in Higher Education ........................................................................... 27

Differentiating Coaching From Other Support Services .................................... 31

Comparison Between Mentoring and Coaching ............................................... 33

Coaching and the Mentoring Role ..................................................................... 34

Success Coaching Model for Study .................................................................... 37

Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 39

Constructivism ..................................................................................................... 41

Self-Authorship .................................................................................................... 42

Learning Partnership Model .................................................................................. 44

Transformative Learning Theory .......................................................................... 45

My Conceptual Framework: An Integration of Theories .................................... 46

Summary ............................................................................................................. 48

Chapter 3 ............................................................................................................ 49

Research Design ................................................................................................ 49

Case Study .......................................................................................................... 50

Participants ........................................................................................................ 52

Selection Criteria ................................................................................................ 53

Description of Setting ......................................................................................... 53
Professional Skills .............................................................................................................. 74
Interpersonal Skills .......................................................................................................... 79
Personal Impact ................................................................................................................ 80
Challenges .......................................................................................................................... 82
Transformational Learning ........................................................................................…… 92
Comparing Job Role and Satisfaction ............................................................................. 92
Being a Change Agent for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ......................................... 94
Experiencing Imposter Syndrome .................................................................................. 99
Having Work-Life Balance .............................................................................................. 100
Navigating the System and Bureaucracy of Higher Education Institutions ............... 103
Being the “Youngest” on the Team .................................................................................. 105
Self-Authorship ............................................................................................................... 107

Significance of the Success Coaching Experience ......................................................... 111

Summary ............................................................................................................................ 114

Chapter 5 ............................................................................................................................ 116

Summary of Study ............................................................................................................. 116

Application of Theoretical Framework to Findings ....................................................... 120

Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 122

Limitations of the Study ................................................................................................. 125

Limitations in Analysis ..................................................................................................... 125
Limitations in Generalization ................................................................. 126
Implications ......................................................................................... 126
Implications of Future Educational Research .................................... 126
Practice ............................................................................................. 127
Policy ................................................................................................. 128
Summary .......................................................................................... 128
References ....................................................................................... 130
Appendices ....................................................................................... 145
Appendix A: Recruitment Email ...................................................... 145
Appendix B: Participant Eligibility, Consent, and Questionnaire ........ 147
Appendix C: Individual Interview Question Protocol ....................... 155
Appendix D: IRB Approval ............................................................... 157
List of Tables

Table 1. Research Timeline .................................................................................................. 59
Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants ................................................. 67
Table 3. Professional and Interpersonal Skills Identified by Interview Participants ............ 117
List of Figures

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for Research Study and Graduate Student Experience .......... 40

Figure 2. Theme Development from Data ........................................................................... 60

Figure 3. Participant Gender ............................................................................................... 68

Figure 4. Number of Semesters Participants Worked as a Success Coach ......................... 69

Figure 5. Number of Years Participants Have Been Working Post-Graduation .................. 69
Chapter 1

Master’s level graduate education is on the rise in the United States (Ginder et al., 2016, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Many graduate students are not just students; they are also employed as graduate interns or graduate assistants while pursuing part-time or full-time education at the post-baccalaureate level in an institution of higher education, typically between the ages of 22–29. Graduate assistants are defined as full-time graduate students who provide service to a college or university and receive a stipend, tuition waiver, or health insurance in compensation (Flora, 2007; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Because of their labor and many contributions to departments and units across any given institution, they are a vital part of the college campus. They play crucial roles in helping universities meet their strategic plans and goals. Aside from academics, many graduate students pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees participate in experiential learning through research, internships, or assistantships as part of their graduate coursework. It is common to find graduate students supporting faculty as teaching assistants and research assistants, serving in roles advancing the higher education (HE) institution in its retention and success work with undergraduate students, and working in student service areas such as tutoring, coaching, mentoring, admissions, orientation, advising, and residential services. Graduate students have become a critical force to assist professional staff employed to support undergraduates.

There are three standard designations of graduate student work on college and university campuses: teaching, research, and administration. The distinction is made based on the graduate students’ functional roles in teaching, research, and administration (Flora, 2007). I utilize a more generalized term of a graduate assistantship that may involve research, teaching, or administrative responsibilities for this study.
Faculty oversee graduate assistants in both research and teaching assistantships. Research assistants support faculty with research tasks that can involve lab work and administrative tasks. Teaching assistantships involve teaching undergraduates and can also involve administrative tasks (Flora, 2007; Park, 2004; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). There are institutional benefits for employing graduate students, including reducing faculty workloads and allowing more time for research endeavors. Graduate assistants in administrative assistantships are overseen by staff in the respective area of the assistantship. In return for the assistantship work, graduate students receive funding for their education, socialization into the culture of academic life, and relevant work experience (Austin, 2002). Graduate student compensation varies and is dependent on individual institutions. In general, graduate assistantships offer a combination of stipends, tuition waivers, health insurance, and, in the case of residence life related assistantships, housing. Stipend amounts and hours required to work can also vary based on the graduate assistants’ enrolled number of credits.

According to White and Nonnamaker (2011), graduate assistantships in master’s programs have become more common in student affairs programs. Graduate assistantship positions in student affairs employ students as teaching assistants, tutors, resident directors, academic advisors, conduct officers, recreational sports officers, campus activities programmers, or in support roles to undergraduates. Graduate assistants are a somewhat invisible workforce that the institution relies on to facilitate its daily work (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). They are underpaid and expected to serve as paraprofessionals in essential roles held by professional staff (Park, 2004). Sometimes they learn more from their hands-on graduate assistantship roles than they do in the classroom (Flora, 2007). These positions align with students’ professional goals.
and deliver helpful service to the HE institution but are not situated or directly overseen by the academic program.

**Academic Success Coaching**

Academic Success Coaching\(^1\) is a relatively new form of student support service in higher education (Robinson, 2015). A Success Coach can help students identify their strengths and work with them to build their skills to succeed in college. A Success Coach can help students develop study skills, study habits, and social skills. Robinson and Gahagan (2010) stated that the individual support provided using goal-setting and self-reflection techniques engages students. As students reflect on their interests, goals, plans, and academics, they take time to process and integrate new learning. Aside from shoring up academic skills, Success Coaches focus on the overall college student experience and transition. They bridge the gap between what the student wants to achieve and how to achieve it by helping them engage in a more robust relationship with on-campus resources. (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Robinson, 2015). For graduate students, these combined academic and experiential educational experiences have the potential to transform their learning and growth as they navigate their graduate and post-graduate journey and move into early professional life.

Since 2000, many colleges have started coaching programs. However, the models vary in purpose, infrastructure, and framework (Robinson, 2015). Sometimes, graduate assistants work as Success Coaches and provide academic and campus resource support to undergraduate students at their selfsame higher education institutions. The Success Coaches use critical thinking practices to engage undergraduates by creating a learning partnership through goal

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\(^1\) Success Coach, Success Coaches, Success Coaching and Success Coaching Center are capitalized because the participants, the coaching process, and center are unique to this case study.
setting and self-reflection to empower students in their college experience. Through a mutual partnership, Success Coaches assist students in identifying goals, engaging in new experiences, and constructing new learning from those experiences. In doing so, they contribute toward students’ development of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004a). As this dynamic relationship is a partnership, there is potential for growth in the Success Coaches’ own development.

**Purpose of Study**

Research studies on academic Success Coaching have measured student success and persistence (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010). Academic coaching studies conducted overseas and in the U.S. have focused on subpopulations of students in STEM field majors, psychology majors, or support to small groups (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018; Robinson, 2015). Existing studies in HE related to coaching have focused on the impact of coaching on the students receiving support. As Success Coaching becomes a more widespread form of support for undergraduate students in higher education, there are increasing numbers of studies examining coaching’s impact on undergraduates. However, there appears to be a void in research about the experiences and growth of the Success Coaches participating in the supporting role (Nghia & Duyen, 2019). To address this gap, researchers should consider the impact of graduate assistantship experiences on graduate students serving as Success Coaches. This study aims to add to the HE literature by examining the coaching experience from the perspective of early professionals who held a graduate assistantship in Success Coaching during their graduate studies at a midsized public institution in the mid-Atlantic region.

The purpose of this study is to understand if the coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students (and implemented with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship) at a midsized public institution have long-term impacts on those early
professionals, specifically in their early post-graduate careers and in their individual growth and development in their post-graduate lives. I interview former graduate students who worked as Success Coaches during their graduate experience as part of a graduate assistantship. Through the interview process, I seek to understand how the Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience helped to shape students’ lives after graduation. Specifically, I look to discover if the skills learned as part of Success Coaching are useful in their current career and if they apply methods learned to navigate their post-graduate life decisions.

**Rationale for Study**

In the United States, graduate degrees designated as a master’s degree in HE were not widely awarded before the late 1800s (Lucas, 2006). The traditional graduate student sought advanced education or wanted to learn more under a particular faculty member. The graduate student role is distinguished by the institutions that hire them based on their purpose or service. According to White and Nonnamaker (2011), there has been a 48 percent increase in graduate assistantships over two decades from 1987 to 2007, a more significant percentage gain than executive/administrative/managerial staff and faculty-level positions in HE. Despite the increase in graduate assistantships in HE, research about the graduate assistantship experience is lacking.

Graduate assistantships in teaching and research exemplify this lag in research in HE. Early research on teaching assistantships focused on the effectiveness of training teaching assistants. Similarly, little research is devoted to the professional outcomes of those participating in research assistantships (Ethington & Paisani, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Ethington and Paisani (1993) examined the growth and professional development of graduate students who held teaching and research assistantships. Aside from financial support, it was generally viewed that an assistantship provides an opportunity for socialization into the academic profession. As
the graduate role has evolved, the amount of research dedicated to graduate students and their experience in graduate assistantship positions has not kept pace. Researchers would do well to examine how graduate students navigate their evolving roles to understand and contribute to research about the graduate students’ experiences during their graduate assistantships. Their dual position as simultaneous graduate students and employees in the HE setting can have long-lasting implications as they navigate life after graduation.

Graduate students contribute in many ways to higher education institutions. By serving as teaching assistants, they provide instruction to undergraduates and support faculty workloads. As research assistants, they help professors in their scholarly work. In support roles, they contribute in myriad ways to support undergraduate student success and retention through orientation, academic advising, academic support, career development, student activities, leadership development, and residential life areas. According to Austin (2002), “Although teaching and research responsibilities surely can provide training opportunities for the future faculty, these assistantship roles sometimes are structured more to serve institutional or faculty needs than to ensure a high-quality learning experience for graduate students” (p. 95).

Graduate students learn from working with faculty in their graduate assistant roles. While graduate students have expressed a lack of professional development opportunities and mentorship, they have expressed the value as a learning opportunity to build self-confidence in their ability to navigate post-graduate life (Austin, 2002). With the significance of graduate assistantship functions in higher education, it is prudent to understand how colleges and universities can support the development and experience of graduate students who serve in graduate assistantship roles. We can understand their personal experience—what they value and why they value the experiences.
Academic Success Coaching is a newer practice to support students in HE (Robinson, 2015). Studies have focused on retention and successful outcomes for undergraduate students participating in coaching, but there are gaps in the literature about the academic Success Coaching experience from the coach’s perspective as well as the coach–coachee dynamic. Insight from graduate students about their coaching experience and navigating their role as graduate students would contribute to literature on graduate assistantship experiences. Lastly, learning about the challenges and benefits of the Success Coaching role would assist in understanding a Success Coaching graduate assistantship.

**Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study is to consider the experiences and insights of Success Coaches, early in their career, after graduating from their master’s degree education. I seek to understand if, how, and to what extent the transformational learning that these former Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate assistantships translates and transfers to a post-graduation professional and personal role. The study aims to gain insight into which skills graduate students who served as Success Coaches found valuable and how these skills are used and applied professionally after graduation.

The goal for graduate students serving in a graduate assistantship as a Success Coach is to empower undergraduate students. They do so by working with students to develop critical thinking and self-reflection through the coach–student partnership. As Success Coaches are also students themselves, they encounter challenges that can bring ideas and beliefs into question. They also have opportunities to reflect on their assumptions and reexamine them in more complex frames of reference as they practice these skills in their graduate assistantship experience. A study examining the graduate student experience serving in a Success Coaching
role and navigating their dual position as both student and employee has the potential to offer insight into both graduate preparation programs and Success Coaching Centers with respect to skills, challenges, support, and mentorship. This study adds to HE literature by providing insight into the impact of a Success Coach’s transformational learning experience, particularly when graduates enter the professional workspace and navigate complex life decisions.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative case study seeks to understand the experiences of master’s degree graduate students who trained and served as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship at a midsized public institution located in the mid-Atlantic region. The following questions are examined to guide the study:

1. What knowledge and skills did graduate students develop and practice in their early careers from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience?
2. What was the nature of transformational learning that Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate assistantship during their master’s degree program?
3. How do coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students and practiced with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship contribute to paraprofessionals’ growth and development (self-authorship)?

**Significance of Study**

The role of graduate students providing essential support to various campus constituents has grown in HE institutions. Graduate assistants in academic and student affairs assist faculty, staff, and students in many different support roles. While graduate students face challenges in their assistantships, they also benefit from their experiential roles. Success Coaching is a newer practice. Studies have focused on its impact on student engagement and retention in the U.S.,
especially with marginalized and specific populations. A deficiency in the literature suggests there is a void in research on the impact and outcomes for students who serve as the coach and participate in an assistantship experience (Nghia & Duyen, 2019). As such studies specific to Success Coaching are lacking, this study offers an opportunity to fill that gap.

This study has the potential to provide insight into several areas in higher education practices that touch graduate students working in graduate assistantships and Success Coaching Centers utilizing their services. First, this study can contribute to an increased understanding of the graduate experience, including specific data on skills developed in graduate assistantships, relationships with supervisors, challenges of the graduate assistant experience, and supports needed by graduate assistants. These are all areas that can help graduate school administrators, faculty, and departments who work with graduate students inform their practices and policies to support graduate students.

Success Coaching Centers are unique to individual higher education institutions, so Success Coaching practices vary. While generalizability is not a characteristic of a qualitative study, insight into the experience of Success Coaches can offer understanding to improve and inform Success Coaching Center practices at other centers with differing models or institutions considering Success Coaching models.

In addition, this Success Coaching Center utilizes Baxter Magolda’s (2004a) Learning Partnership Model (LPM) in working with undergraduate students. The LPM is designed as a framework to promote self-authorship. It has been utilized in educational practice to create an interdisciplinary writing curriculum, promote diversity education among community college students, develop learning partnerships in campus housing, and design a graduate program in student affairs (Baxter Magolda, 2004a). Understanding how graduate students apply the model
as part of their assistantship and its implication in their growth provides additional information to the body of literature about the use of the LPM with undergraduate and graduate students.

The growing roles for graduate assistants and the work they do directly impact outcomes for undergraduate students (Austin, 2002; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). As the graduate assistantship roles grow on college and university campuses to help support undergraduate student success, the graduate student’s experience as both a student and an employee, as well as their overall development, is essential to examine, as they largely have been ignored as a student population. Their success is linked to the success of HE institutions. As the graduate student roles in graduate assistantships increase on campuses, insight into their experiences offers the institutions that hire them an understanding of their challenges and opportunities to support this critical population of students/employees. For administrators and institutions interested in graduate student support, success, and retention, an understanding of a group left behind in HE studies would be illuminating.

Significance of Methods

The aim of this study is to gain insight from paraprofessional graduate students who participated in a Success Coaching graduate assistantship to learn if and how their experiences have long-term impacts as they navigate their early careers and post-graduate life. A qualitative methodology was chosen to conduct this study. Students who receive services through coaching and mentoring practices bring multiple identities, strengths, and challenges. A group of students can participate in the same coaching or mentoring program, yet each student will have a unique experience because of their individual life experiences. To capture the essence of the student’s lived experience, we must ask the student about their experience as a coach or the student receiving coaching. Qualitative research is well situated to understand the lived experience of
those participating in the coaching process. The Success Coaching experience is unique to the
group of students to be studied. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), “qualitative data
consists of information obtained on open-ended questions in which the researcher does not use
predetermined categories or scales to collect the data” (p. 179).

A qualitative inquiry intends to develop an in-depth understanding of a central
phenomenon. To understand the phenomenon, qualitative researchers purposefully select
individuals and sites for data collection (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). Graduate students
serving as Success Coaches experienced the coaching phenomenon as part of their graduate
assistantship. Therefore, a purposeful sample of students who experienced this phenomenon was
chosen to participate in this study. At the time of the graduate assistantship, the study
participants attended a midsized public university in the mid-Atlantic region.

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative case studies can offer great insight into a
research study as the researcher, who has a deeper understanding of the case themselves, collects
and analyzes data. A case study approach using semi-structured, individual interviews was
employed to gather data to gain a deeper understanding of the early professionals’ experiences as
Success Coaches. Semi-structured interviews delved deeper into graduate students’ experiences.
A case study qualitative design allowed for an in-depth understanding of how the skills
professionals identified as valuable translated to their professional and personal growth and
influenced their growth and development (i.e., self-authorship).

Positionality

As a South Asian female immigrant, I faced significant challenges completing my
undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States. During my one and a half years of
graduate work, I held one graduate assistantship in areas spanning teaching and research. I
assisted in field testing a new math, science, and technology curriculum in middle schools for a nonprofit company located on the West coast. My graduate institution was on the East coast which required travel to the West coast for training. I was responsible for locally training teachers, collecting data, and transmitting data to the nonprofit organization via the first “internet” utilized by educational institutions in the early 1990s. The hands-on, experiential skills I learned as part of my graduate assistantship and training helped me grow in my career as I entered the professional world. The skills I learned and applied as a graduate student were long-lasting. Aside from honing communication, organizational, and management skills, the experience helped develop a way of thinking that I have utilized to make professional and personal decisions throughout my life. The combination of academic coursework and its application in my assistantship sharpened my critical, reflective, and analytical skills. It taught me to apply these skills systemically. The experience helped to establish the following step-by-step approach I have relied on when faced with a potential problem or situation:

1. Critically examine and analyze the problem or situation from different angles.
2. Think through potential solutions.
3. Evaluate potential risks and gains for each option, including critical reflection on the effects on the related system(s).
4. Make a choice(s) to move forward and create a systematic plan for the chosen solution(s).

This way of thinking has enabled me to solve many complex problems in my professional and personal life for over thirty years.

Over the past two years, I have managed a Success Coaching Center that supports undergraduate and graduate students with academic coaching services. The center serves approximately 17,500 students who utilize academic coaching services. As part of my role, I
supervise graduate students employed in the center as Success Coaches as part of their graduate assistantship. As the center supervisor, I have worked with 18 graduate students who have since graduated from the institution. The Success Coaching Center is a vital part of the institution’s strategic mission. It directly impacts student success and retention for first-year students, transfer students, students on probation, and underrepresented minority student subpopulations.

In my work with graduate students, I have observed skill development with students seeking Success Coaching services. At the beginning of the coaching experience, graduate assistants ask deliberate questions to learn more about their students to evaluate needs and figure out how to provide assistance. With practice, they become more nuanced in their approach in their work with students. The change in their confidence in their interactions with students is observable. Their ability to put students they work with at ease increases, and their knowledge of campus resources to make student referrals grows. In my observation, graduate students begin to apply their classroom learning to their lived experience as a Success Coach. They apply more critical thinking and analysis in working with students and offer solutions that take a more holistic approach to understanding the complexity of working in a system. These skills influence their thesis and clinical work and the professional and personal decisions they navigate as graduation approaches.

Summary

Graduate assistants are a vital part of many departments on college campuses. They play crucial roles in helping universities meet strategic plan goals. Skinner (2020) stated, even with the significance and the commonplace of the graduate assistant role within the field of student affairs, there is limited research on the experiences of
these graduate students and the impact of these experiences on their success as new professionals. (p. 2)

Studies on academic Success Coaching have focused on student success and student persistence. Academic coaching studies conducted internationally have centered on subgroups of college students (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). The impact of coaching for students receiving coaching has been the core area of study in current HE-related research. As the population of graduate students serving in graduate assistantships as academic Success Coaches grows, HE institutions benefit from their work. Aside from the financial benefits, it is important for HE institutions to understand how former graduate students experience their intersecting role as a Success Coach and student during their graduate assistantship and the lasting professional and personal benefits. This study hopes to add to the literature about their experience.
Chapter 2

This study seeks to examine the long-lasting influence of the Success Coaching role on graduate students who have worked as Coaches as part of their graduate assistantship. In Chapter 2, I review literature supporting the study and elaborate on: (a) the history and growth of graduate assistantships in higher education, (b) the graduate student role in higher education, (c) the history of coaching in higher education, and (d) Success Coaching models examined in this study. The chapter ends with the theoretical framework that shapes this qualitative case study.

History and Growth of Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education

In this section, I review the history of graduate assistantships in higher education. First, I elaborate on the complexity of the higher education institution and its influence on graduate assistantships. Next, I discuss classifications of graduate assistantships in HE and their respective roles in college and universities. I conclude the section detailing the role of student affairs graduate assistantships in HE.

The Complexity of Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions are complex, consisting of smaller functional units working together to create a functional academy. Depending on its classification as a public or private college or university, there is outside influence from the parties involved in governance (Birnbaum & Edelson, 1989). According to Birnbaum and Edelson (1989), the organizational structures within which colleges and universities operate vary, and administrative and faculty goals may not align. The governance and organizational structures involve political, academic, and leadership pressures that may disadvantage some groups on campuses and favor others (Newfield, 2018). Those in power can make decisions that shift bureaucratic structures (Newfield, 2018). According to Skorobohacz (2013), “Employee-graduate students both position
themselves, and find themselves being positioned by others, in a variety of ways within institutional spaces” (p. 202). All these factors have influenced and continue to affect graduate assistantships and the evolution of the graduate student role in the academy.

Graduate degrees in higher education (HE) in the United States have been awarded since the mid-1850s (Lucas, 2006). Graduate degrees became widely available after the 1870s as more present-day U.S. HE institutions opened (Austin, 2002; Lucas, 2006; Rice, 1996). The traditional graduate student sought higher education or continued learning under a particular faculty member as an advanced learner or tutor (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). The tutelage of the graduate student under a specific tutor served as a socialization process for their future professional goals (Austin, 2002).

Historically, faculty governed the academic side of higher education institutions. The administration did little to influence the faculty’s role (Lucas, 2006). The complexity of the institution and the governing pressures have changed the role of the faculty as well as the graduate assistantship roles filled by graduate students (Austin, 2002; Newfield, 2018).

**Classifications of Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education**

Undergraduate enrollment hovered around 30,000 students in 1900 (Lucas, 2006). After World War II, when returning veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill, college enrollments grew to half a million (Lucas, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2021), nearly 10 percent of enrolled graduate students, or 328,979 students, were employed in graduate assistantship positions in 2007. According to White and Nonnamaker (2011), this is an increase of nearly 48 percent from 1987 to 2007 with a more significant percentage gain than both executive/administrative/managerial staff and faculty-level positions.
As the student population increased, faculty numbers grew, as did the faculty workload. And increased faculty workload contributed to a growth in graduate student teaching assistantships (Park, 2004). Teaching assistantships involved teaching undergraduate courses, including lab and discussion sections, developing the overall course curriculum, grading, and other responsibilities (Flora, 2007; Park, 2004; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Faculty also oversaw graduate research assistants as they assisted with library searches, set up laboratory protocols, and completed data and analyses tasks.

There is little recent research devoted to the professional outcomes of participating in research assistantships (Ethington & Paisani, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Since research and teaching assistantships were the first types of graduate assistantships, early studies on graduate students focused on research and teaching assistantships. Malaney (1988) found that research on teaching assistantships mainly centered on training programs for teaching assistants and their teaching effectiveness, not on the impact or benefits to the student serving in the teaching assistantship. Ethington and Paisani (1993) examined the growth and professional development of those graduate students who held teaching and research assistantships. Ethington and Paisani generally viewed that, aside from financial support, an assistantship provided an opportunity for socialization into the academic profession.

**Role of Student Affairs Graduate Assistantships in Higher Education**

As college enrollment soared, colleges and universities tapped graduate students to meet new instructional and service needs (Lucas, 2006; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). The role of graduate students shifted to include administrator-in-training positions. Graduate students also took on leadership and mentorship roles to aid and educate younger scholars. Austin (2002) states, “much of the structure of graduate programs serves as much to make the institutions work
effectively as to prepare graduate students for future professional roles” (p.95). Graduate students filled support roles to help HE institutions reach their goals.

Graduate assistantships in master’s degree programs have become more commonplace in student affairs, with institutions hiring graduate students in various roles to support students (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Positions include academic, support, and residential operations of a campus. Many student affairs preparation programs use a training model that includes academic coursework and fieldwork in an assistantship or internship (Schuh et al., 2010).

As the graduate role has evolved, the amount of research dedicated to graduate students and their experience in graduate assistant positions has not changed. For this study, I utilize a more generalized term of a graduate assistantship that may involve teaching and administrative responsibilities. Student affairs graduate assistantships are more administrative but can involve elements of teaching and research assistantships. This study’s Success Coaching graduate assistantship closely aligns with graduate assistant positions in student affairs master’s programs with a service component.

**Graduate Student Role in Higher Education**

I have presented the evolution of the graduate assistantship in HE. Now I explore the role of graduate students in assistantship roles. Specifically, I address the challenges (including tension in the employee/student role, challenges with supervision, and lack of preparation) as well as the benefits (socialization and professional skill development) that graduate students face in their assistantship roles.

**Challenges With Graduate Assistantships**

According to Kinser (1993), new professionals entering student affairs did not feel connected between what they learned in their graduate school curriculum and their first job.
Many graduate assistants enter their assistantship without experience in their roles. Graduate assistants have reported a lack of preparation, orientation, training, supervision, and support in their graduate assistantship roles (American Federation of Teachers, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Skorobohacz, 2013). Skorobohacz (2013) stated that graduate students experience “challenges when their academic and work roles intersect within the university” (p. 200). Debates around the challenges graduate students face upon employment have remained the same over many years (Malveaux, 2004). The issue is related to the status students hold as both a student and an employee. The three specific challenges that I detail below include tensions in the employee/student role, challenges with supervision, and lack of preparation.

Tension in the Employee/Student Role. Navigating multiple roles as a graduate assistant can cause role conflict (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Skorobohacz, 2013). The tension in an apprentice role or part-time employee role is genuine. Many assistantships involve working directly with undergraduate students to help meet the demand and assist with student retention and success. To understand and contribute to research about graduate assistants’ experiences, we must examine the tension between a graduate student’s position as both a student and employee in the HE setting. The argument that graduate assistants are students, not employees, is problematic. While the financial assistance graduate students receive as part of a graduate assistantship is helpful, it is not without challenges stemming from their conflicting roles. Graduate assistants relying on a graduate assistantship tuition waiver or stipend on a semester or yearly basis feel pressured (Skorobohacz, 2013). They must focus on their work and ensure their employment status takes priority before academic or educational goals.

Over the years, graduate students have unionized to bargain for workplace rights (Dewberry, 2005). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the umbrella organization that
represents the graduate students who have unionized at some universities. AFT (2004) argued that universities have used the employee-graduate student status to their benefit. When they face budget cuts, they are referred to as students. When there is additional work, they can help with the extra workload for a fraction of a full-time employee’s salary. Institutions also rely on graduate assistants as graders, discussion leaders, lab specialists, advisors, community outreach specialists, administrative assistants, and many other positions necessary for the full functioning of today’s university. Institutions make this argument when graduate students want fair treatment as employees and want to unionize for fair treatment (AFT, 2004).

White and Nonnamaker (2011) offered that this has an impact on student persistence to degree completion and graduate student turnover and further suggest:

A recent phenomenon in higher education discussed at professional conferences but yet to appear in the literature suggests that graduate assistants are being hired for various roles in response to budget cuts instead of as full-time or part-time staff. These graduate assistants are expected to maintain similar workload expectations as professional staff. These expectations can lead to graduate assistants feeling overwhelmed and wanting to leave the position, if not the degree program. (p. 49)

AFT (2004) agreed that there are benefits to participating in graduate assistantships. Still, graduate students are new to the field, and as such, they should receive the benefit all new employees receive upon entry to new positions. They should be offered training, mentorship, clear communication about expectations, and professional development to feel competent in their new position. If graduate students were not taking on these roles, HE institutions would need to hire part-time and full-time employees to provide services. As employees, they would include
essential training and support to succeed in the roles. Since graduate students provide the same services as professional employees, they should be considered employees and receive the same benefits.

**Challenges With Supervision.** According to Flora (2007), the National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) decisions have viewed graduate assistants as students, not employees, over the past 35 years. This ambiguity in status can be conflicting for graduate assistants, as supervisors may treat them as employees without regard for their academic status. Students feel pressure from their supervisor, advisor, and themselves to ensure their assistantship work is up to par to keep their assistantship award; this comes at a price to their academics. They must learn to navigate the power dynamic of a novice apprentice working with an expert supervisor or faculty (Skorobohacz, 2013).

Supervisors who work with graduate assistants must consider common challenges in working with graduate students. Challenges include role conflict, supporting graduate students to degree completion, student turnover, and disconnect between an assistantship and the student’s academic program (White & Nonnamaker, 2011).

The AFT, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) have recommended professional practice standards for those working with graduate students in graduate assistant supervisory and faculty roles. AFT recommends institutions provide paid orientation training, ongoing training, and professional development opportunities to graduate student employees. The ACPA-NASPA (2015) Advising and Supporting competency area recommends “establishing rapport with student groups, colleagues and others that acknowledges differences in lived experiences” (p.36) along with
facilitating reflection to make meaning from experiences, facilitating problem-solving, and
challenging and supporting students, to name a few.

Along with the above-mentioned organizations, White and Nonnamaker (2011)
recommended supervisors encourage graduate students to develop multiple mentorship
opportunities, set clear guidelines and expectations of the graduate assistantship role, establish
transparent communication, offer training for the role, and provide productive feedback that
integrates self-reflection on the part of the graduate student.

**Lack of Preparation.** Lack of preparation is another substantial challenge for graduate
assistants. Professional practices should help graduate students socialize into the field, provide
training, communicate clear expectations and obligations, and support students in their
professional development (AFT, 2004; CAS, 2019; Flora, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).
More importantly, the assistantship experience should develop critical thinking and promote self-
reflection. Skorobohacz (2013) offered that self-reflection:

> is a valuable process to commit to throughout all phases of work and student life.

> By engaging in ongoing reflection, employee-graduate students will become more
cognizant of their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles. This growing self-
awareness will support them to assess their needs in both academic and non-
academic contexts, recognize their potential, identify issues of concern, and
advocate for change (p. 215).

Austin (2002) concluded that “Students also reported that the assistantships lacked
organized professional development opportunities, minimal feedback and mentoring from
faculty, and few opportunities for guided reflection” (p.102-103). In Austin’s research, graduate
students expressed five recommendations to improve preparation for faculty careers: Consistent
mentorship, advising, and feedback; occasions to observe, meet, and dialog with peers; varied teaching opportunities; information and direction about faculty responsibilities; and opportunity for directed reflection. While the above examples include doctoral student experiences, they shed light on similar challenges that master’s level students face.

According to Brown-Wright et al. (1997), experiential studies associated with nonteaching graduate assistantships are almost nonexistent. Research in the student affairs area has not addressed graduate students engaged in assistantship positions. It has focused on graduate preparation programs, entry-level, mid-level, and senior administrators, and faculty perceptions (Burkard et al., 2005; Renn & Hodges, 2007). The disconnect graduate assistants have experienced does not support administrator and faculty perceptions that all assistantships help further career and education goals (Thompson & Ellis, 1984).

Benefits of Graduate Assistantships

While graduate assistants face challenges in graduate assistantships, there are many benefits from their positions. The graduate assistantship has been viewed as a professional development opportunity offering socialization into the college profession and providing financial support towards post-baccalaureate education (Ethington & Paisani, 1993).

Socialization. According to Corcoran and Clark (1984), socialization encompasses knowledge about the culture of a group, including its principles, viewpoints, and expectations. Graduate assistants starting a new position look for new mentors who can help them grow, personally and professionally, which supervisors can offer (Grube et al., 2005). As mentors, supervisors can support new student affairs graduate assistants by providing opportunities to reflect on contemporary issues, professional integrity, and networking opportunities (White & Nonnamaker, 2011).
Austin (2002) examined the socialization of doctoral students preparing for future faculty positions. Austin sought to determine if graduate school preparation was sufficient for entry into the academic teaching world. She compared the critical findings of her qualitative study to quantitative data. Data revealed that many factors contribute to graduate student development, including their prior experiences and background. The factors affecting student socialization included “observing, listening, and interacting with faculty, interacting with peers, and interacting with family and personal friends” (Austin, 2002, p.102-103). Master’s level graduate students also have similar factors that contribute to their development and growth.

**Professional Skill Development.** White and Nonnamaker (2011) suggested that graduate assistants receive meaningful feedback and mentorship with professional skills through a graduate assistantship when given supportive supervision. Mentorship is an informal process defined by Bozeman and Feeney as “the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development” (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007, p. 731).

In student affairs, graduate assistant roles can offer a type of apprenticeship to become more familiar with the academic culture and provide hands-on experience in the field. Graduate assistantships in student affairs master’s programs often complement in-class learning. Assistantships are designed as a hands-on learning experience (Young, 2019). Supervised experiences allow graduate assistants to apply their classroom education to real-life circumstances (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; White & Nonnamaker, 2011).

In Skinner’s (2020) study on the impact of graduate assistantships on the preparation of early career student affairs professionals, she found, “Most participants had a positive experience and were able to gain valuable practical skills that assisted them to be successful in their full-
time professional roles. If the graduate assistantship experience was negative, the internships filled the void and helped the participants gain valuable skills” (p. 91).

Renn and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) national study of new professionals in student affairs collected data on 90 new professionals in their first full-time job. Qualitative data findings suggested the importance of graduate program curricula, administrative practice, and future research. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of previous work experience in their transition to their first professional role. One participant stated, “I think the aspect that surprised me most was how easy the transition was from a graduate hall director to a full-time hall director” (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008, p. 324).

Graduate students bring with them multiple identities and experiences as they navigate their journey through their graduate studies. Their past experiences influence how they handle the challenges they face as they traverse their graduate path. Through their struggles, there are advantages they potentially carry with them to their post-graduate experience. The Success Coaching assistantship experience includes training and ongoing mentorship throughout the graduate student’s assistantship experience. As this qualitative case study is specific to a graduate assistantship in an academic Success Coaching role, it is essential to understand the origins of academic coaching and its role and purpose in HE.

**History of Coaching**

In this section of the literature review, I present a brief history of the origins of coaching and its entry into the HE arena. I present the early use of coaching and success with small populations of students in the form of life coaching in HE and its expansion as academic coaching as a support service in HE. I differentiate coaching, as a newer support service, from other support services in HE such as counseling, advising, tutoring, and mentoring. I end the
section with a comparison between mentoring and coaching and provide insight into the mentorship role within coaching.

According to Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018), life coaching emerged from positive psychology and has been practiced in the general population. The process involves a coach helping a client achieve goals related to their career, personal (weight loss, improve social skills, etc.), financial, or academic aspirations. In the 1980s, coaching became popular in the business world where life coaching and executive coaching became a widespread practice and continues today (Hurd, 2002).

Life coaching is holistic; it considers the person’s physical, emotional, and social well-being, and is guided by the person being coached (Warren, 2019). According to Grant and Greene (2003), life coaching was designed for coachees to undertake personal and career goals and attain them to enhance their well-being. Bolch (2001) showed those participating in executive coaching indicated improved productivity, increased job satisfaction, and better work interactions with coworkers and managers. Bandura (1982) found that people receiving coaching felt an increase in self-efficacy, which is a person’s belief that they can manage their life circumstances and create change. The idea of a coach assisting coachees to improve self-efficacy, boost results, and achieve goals translated well to HE. Coaching made its way into the education field in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As previously stated, professional life coaching was growing considerably, but the presence of coaching in higher education contexts was minimal (Griffiths, 2015). The student coaching models lacked a convincing theoretical educational framework to give clarity and focus to its many educational claims. Additionally, there was a need to transfer theory and practice from the primary domain of business and professional leadership to the higher education setting.
Arguments were also made that coaching duplicated some student services already offered on campuses like mentoring, counseling, and advising, and coaching was a service that provided study skills.

*Coaching in Higher Education*

As a means to increase retention and graduation rates, coaching entered HE by supporting first-year students or other student populations needing assistance with academic skills and transition (Robinson, 2015). Colleges and universities referenced life coaching as coaching entered the HE arena from the business world.

Life coaching, coaching, Success Coaching, and academic coaching are terms used in higher education. A description for the coaching role in HE is complex because of its similarities to the work of other campus partners in advising, counseling, or tutoring, who are often unsure of what coaches do that may be different from their distinctive role (Robinson, 2015). Regardless of the type of coaching referenced, coaches set goals and lay out steps needed to achieve the goals with their coachees. It is important to look at the goal(s) and how the coaches work with students (formal vs. informal, guiding vs. interactive) to distinguish the type of coaching taking place.

For this review, coaching, academic coaching, and Success Coaching are used interchangeably. Academic coaching refers to coaching related to helping students achieve academic goals. Robinson and Gahagan (2010) offered that academic coaching has a “focus on three main steps: self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting” (p. 27). Success Coaching is a relatively new practice in the higher education landscape and shows promise in the small number of studies conducted related to student success and persistence, which is addressed later in the chapter.
Life Coaching in Higher Education. Life coaching was the first type of coaching referenced in HE. Research defines life coaching as a professional practice whereby a coach and an individual work collaboratively to establish personal goals (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). With roots in psychology, life coaching aims to build on one’s strengths and promote well-being in all areas of an individual’s life (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018).

Studies completed with specific populations of college students helped to demonstrate the efficacy of life coaching. Fried and Irwin (2016) uncovered some positive results of the life coaching process for highly stressed university students. Populations included college students with learning disabilities and ADHD (Parker & Boutelle, 2009), female students with obesity (Van Zandvoort et al., 2009), and English college students inclined to procrastination (Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015). Many students struggle with procrastination in their college work. Procrastination has been revealed to have a detrimental impact on academic outcomes. Sims (2014) found coaching had positive effects in reducing students’ procrastination and increasing productiveness.

Studies have also shown that life coaching positively affects other elements of student success. According to Franklin and Doran (2009), life coaching had positive effects on educational self-efficacy, which is an important predictor of academic performance. They also found that it positively affects hope, which is connected to wellness, optimism, and critical thinking. Lastly, Franklin and Doran (2009) found that life coaching impacts resiliency, which helps students persist through challenging situations. In their adjustment to their first year, students face multiple stressors including financial difficulties, academic struggles, career indecision, personal issues, and relationship conflicts. Stress can negatively impact students,
leading some to drop out. Life coaching is an accessible and inexpensive option for helping students effectively manage stress during transition and growth.

**Academic Coaching.** Similar to life coaching, academic coaching (or Success Coaching) supports students’ personal development through a coach/learner partnership. However, Success Coaching targets academic skill building and goal setting in addition to personal well-being. While academic coaching traditionally involves an individual exchange between an academic coach and student, coaching sessions can also occur in small groups, workshops, and classrooms (Scrivener & Weiss, 2009).

Academic coaching is linked with positive student outcomes. Findings have demonstrated coaching improved study skills (Field et al., 2013; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Richman, et al., 2014), increased GPAs (Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013), increased retention rates (Allen & Lester, 2012; Bettinger & Baker, 2014), and raised graduation rates (Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Coaching offers HE institutions another method to effect student retention, success, and engagement.

The use of coaching with small subpopulations began to be explored as a means for HE institutions to meet retention and outcome goals for incoming students. According to Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018), few large-scale studies to date have examined the potential impact of coaching in HE in the United States. Bigger studies on coaching have been completed overseas (Leidenfrost et al., 2014), which hold potential to work with first-year, underrepresented minority, and first-generation student populations on campuses. First-generation students are defined as the first in their family to seek post-secondary education. To support these specialized groups of students, coaching emerged in higher education as a promising practice in student support services.
Bettinger and Baker (2014) conducted one of the first significant research studies on coaching. They found students had higher retention and completion rates if they participated in coaching offered by InsideTrack, an independent provider of coaching services to HE institutions. They concluded that further research needed to be conducted to explore coaching, coaching types, and the effects coaching has in working with varied populations of students in HE.

With Bettinger and Baker’s (2014) findings that student progress, retention, and completion increased through coaching, academic coaching offered a new practice for retention and success methods to HE institutions. Though the practice is relatively new compared to student support services like counseling and advising, hundreds of colleges and universities across the nation have implemented coaching programs. Pechac (2017) noted, however, that without the years of empirical evidence that support practices like mentoring, tutoring, and counseling, higher education practitioners and policymakers still have much to learn about this promising practice.

Studies found that aside from supporting the development of positive academic skills, Success Coaches focus on students’ overall college experience and transition, helping students engage in a more robust relationship with on-campus resources and bridging the gap between what the students want and how to achieve it (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Robinson, 2015).

According to Tinto’s social integration theory, when students feel integrated in their classes and institution, they are more likely to persist and graduate (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Meaningful contacts and connections that students share with others in the campus community promote integration, persistence, and learning (Tinto, 1993). Studies have also found a positive correlation between persistence and students who engage with faculty or staff, including their
view of the campus environment and overall satisfaction (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto also defined the institutional obligation to help students succeed. Obligations include clear and high expectations of students; high levels of academic, social, and financial support for students; frequent assessment and feedback to help students gauge their progress and adjust; and involvement or engagement in the academic and social realms of the campus (Arminio et al., 2017). As coaching practices increased on campuses, empirical studies introduced theoretical approaches to study coaching practices applied in retention and success efforts.

**Differentiating Coaching From Other Support Services**

In the next section, I briefly touch upon the ambiguity of coaching practice and its evolving role on college campuses. Because there are no standard practices that define coaching, it is blurred with other established practices that support students. Coaching can resemble similar services such as counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and advising. While there are similarities in how the services serve students and work to support student success, there are distinct differences offered in literature (Warren, 2019). Sepulveda (2020) offered:

On some campuses, coaching has a clear differentiation between academic advising, counseling, and mentoring. On other campuses, the coach title has replaced the advisor title without any additional training to support the coaching role. If coaching is to remain a viable role on college campuses, we must understand the intricacies of the role, how it relates to other roles on campus, and best practices to ensure quality coaching. Developing basic and common
standards of coaching practices is necessary if coaching is to remain on college campuses in the United States. (p. 22)

Academic coaching is a new form of student support service in HE (Robinson, 2015). As such, there are similarities and differences among the three areas of student support currently researched in HE: mentoring, coaching, and tutoring. All three areas support and engage students, and all three have varied models they follow based on the HE institution implementing the model. There are also relationship dynamics that differ with the respective service. Irby (2012) made a distinction among the areas:

Mentors build significant relationships with their mentees, and such relationships may be retained for a long time period and even for a lifetime. Coaches also develop a trusting relationship, but there is a targeted goal and once the goal has been reached, the coach typically withdraws after repeating the assistive task with the coached individual. Tutors work on short-term goals and tasks for specific improvement. (p. 297)

The Success Coach’s role expands beyond academic advising. LaRocca (2015) stated that students found working with a Success Coach to be less formal than working with an academic advisor. They found their interaction with their Success Coach helpful because they could talk to them about experiences outside of the classroom and how to navigate the campus environment. Perez (2014) identified three themes from interviewing students participating in mentoring and coaching programs at two community colleges in California: role model, empowerment, and motivation. The study found that students perceived coaches and mentors as role models who motivated and empowered them to become involved and engaged on campus and in their communities (Perez, 2014).
As this study’s focus is on the role of graduate students working as a Success Coach, I now focus on one service most often mentioned with coaching in literature: mentoring. Mentoring has been interchangeably used with coaching to help understand the experience from the coach’s perspective.

**Comparison Between Mentoring and Coaching**

The terms mentoring services and coaching services have often been used synonymously in higher education. Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) distinguished coaching from mentoring as an informal relationship with no predetermined way of working with a client. A coach–client relationship is viewed as an equal partnership, whereas there is an expert-novice relationship in mentoring (Griffiths, 2015). The relationship of the mentoring dyad is usually defined as peer-to-peer, near-peer-to-peer, or someone who is more experienced paired with someone less experienced. Compared to a mentoring relationship, which is often informal, coaching presents an opportunity to formalize working with students to force self-reflection. The most common objective for coaching is to gain new insight and create new habits as clients move toward a more fulfilling and flourishing life. Structured coaching forces self-reflection through guided discussions and activities.

Pascarelli (1998/2013) noted that mentors establish trust, demonstrate empathy, and function as a guide, advocate, and supporter to their mentees. When this occurs on a university campus, the peer mentors can assist first-year students by providing emotional support, increasing feelings of connectedness on campus, and promoting integration within the campus community.

Studies have shown a positive correlation between mentoring and student success, retention, and sense of belonging in student participants. University-based peer-mentoring
programs, especially during the first year, can help students feel more connected and integrated to the university (Glaser et al., 2006), which increases student retention (Ward et al., 2010) and their likelihood of graduating (Habley et al., 2010). Because of this positive correlation, colleges and universities utilize mentoring programs to support students.

*Coaching and the Mentoring Role*

Since coaching is a newer practice in HE, studies have focused on its impact on student engagement and retention in the U.S., especially with marginalized and specialized populations. A deficiency in the literature suggests there is a lack of research on the impact and outcomes for students who serve as a coach and participate in internship experience (Nghia & Duyen, 2019). Though not as proliferative as mentoring studies, coaching studies conducted have focused on student retention, skills, and graduation rates for students receiving coaching.

Since there is a lack of coaching research on the Coaches’ experience, mentoring studies can offer a lens into the supporting role. A review of literature reveals research focusing on the mentor and mentoring role experience in the mentor–mentee dyad. As such studies are lacking specific to Success Coaching, a review of current studies on mentoring roles can provide possible insight into this type of role.

Chan and Luo (2020) studied three student mentors’ mentoring experience whose self-perceived dispositions seemed “unfitting” to the “ideal” mentor standards in a case study using a conceptual model for a near-peer mentoring program in Hong Kong. Their research highlights the many aspects of mentor characteristics and skill development in near-peer mentoring.

Jackson (2017) used a phenomenological approach to study developing pre-professional identity (PPI) in undergraduates through work-integrated learning (WIL). The study aimed to explore the role of WIL in developing PPI among undergraduates. It also aimed to raise
awareness on the nature and importance of developing PPI to improve the transition of new graduates into the work role and their well-being in the workplace. Baxter Magolda’s (1998) self-authorship framework was used to study the developing PPI through WIL. The study concluded that work placements can offer an important platform for nurturing individuality. Students use the experience to make sense of their future profession through observing, questioning, and interacting with seasoned professionals. Reflecting on their involvement through learning activities and assessment are highlighted as important elements of placement design, as it is critical for students to question and make sense of what they observed and learned (Jackson, 2017).

College programs for students with intellectual disabilities often engage peer mentors to promote students’ social connections to campus. Culnane et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative instrumental case study to explore the mentors’ perspectives. They examined how mentor–mentee relationships formed, how mentors offered support, and how mentors facilitated membership into the campus community. Mentors perceived themselves as well-situated to assist their mentees grow into college insiders. They used coaching and direction setting to help mentees identify factors that appeared to help or deter changes in mentee status, including their own beliefs and skills, role conflicts, and person-centered thinking.

Jenkinson and Benson (2016) used a case study approach to examine an assessment and mentoring program (AMP) for preservice teachers in Australia. The mentors considered AMP as a pathway to develop experience in assessment, engage in appropriate professional relationships through mentoring, and further their professional learning experiences. Through the involvement in mentoring and developing and implementing assessment, mentors perceived they would have
an opportunity to develop valuable work-ready skills to transfer to their future professional role as a teacher in a school.

Reddick et al. (2012) conducted another study focusing on the benefits to mentors in the mentor–mentee relationship. This study utilized a social exchange framework. The research analyzed qualitative narratives of 81 graduate student mentors who took part in an Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate Internship at the University of Texas in Austin. Findings suggested that, in addition to individual benefits, serving as a mentor has four significant professional benefits. These include gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and their academic discipline, developing advising and mentoring skills, contributing to their academic and professional field by supporting a developing scholar from an underrepresented population, and awareness that mentoring can assist both mentees and mentors in reaching their goals.

Lastly, Gunn et al. (2017) studied benefits and challenges of participating in a mentoring program from both the mentor and mentee perspective in a peer mentoring program. The mentors were fourth-year students mentoring first-year students in a retail management undergraduate degree program at a commuter campus university in Canada. Mentors expressed that being a role model was the most challenging and most beneficial part of their experience. Other challenges included providing psychological and emotional support and academic subject knowledge. Other benefits mentioned included providing psychological and emotional support and goal setting assistance.

These mentoring studies can offer insight into the experience of serving in a supporting role as it relates to challenges, skill development, and experiences in a mentoring role. This qualitative study looks to gain an understanding of the Success Coaching role in a graduate assistantship, so consideration must be given to the Success Coaching role specific to this study.
In the final section of this literature review, I present literature on the Success Coaching models utilized on college and university campuses. This important work is often available to graduate assistants in the form of a graduate assistantship or hourly work. Robinson (2015) found commonalities among in-house coaching programs through her analysis. Most Success Coaching programs were initiated to increase retention, work with academically deficient students, and to provide a unique or specialized campus service to a specific group of students. However, Robinson’s (2015) study concluded that coaching programs have been implemented using multiple methodologies and utilized diverse theories and trainings to guide coaching practice. In fact, most coaching programs lack any guiding theory or framework to direct their work (Robinson, 2015). Additionally, not many studies have examined the coaches’ perspective or the coach–coachee interaction. This literature review located one study that offers insight into a coaching experience.

Warren (2019) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the experiences of graduate students working as academic coaches in an academic coaching program at a public metropolitan research university in the southern United States. The academic coaches were selected and trained to carry out the duties of an academic coach to fulfill the requirements of their graduate assistantships. Warren (2019) sought to answer, “What does it mean to be an academic coach?” (p. 4). The study concluded that while the Coaches’ experience was positive overall, “being an academic coach means being involved in an ongoing power struggle between limited power, powerful relationships, and empowering preparation for the future” (Warren, 2019, pp.193-194).

This study seeks to build on the coaching experience by looking to discover how the Success Coaching experience affects graduate students in their post-graduate journey. The
literature reveals multiple methodologies utilized in coaching models. It is important to define the model used for this survey as it connects to the theoretical framework used to conduct the study and influences the Coaches’ coaching experience. From her survey results, Robinson (2015) developed a definition of coaching that serves this study:

Academic success coaching is the individualized practice of asking reflective, motivation-based questions, providing opportunities for formal self-assessment, sharing effective strategies, and co-creating a tangible plan. The coaching process offers students an opportunity to identify their strengths, actively practice new skills, and effectively navigate appropriate resources that ultimately result in skill development, performance improvement, and increased persistence. (p. 126)

In Renn and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) national study of new professionals in student affairs, they collected data on 90 new professionals in their first full-time job. The qualitative data findings provided in their paper made suggestions for graduate program curricula, administrative practice, and future research:

This finding points to the need to consider graduate students’ personal epistemologies and development in the design and implementation of master’s curricula in student affairs and higher education. Attention to cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development (see Baxter Magolda, 2004) and students’ ability to see their own education and professional development as object, rather than subject (see Kegan), could lead to a reconsideration of the process of graduate education as well as, perhaps, some of the content. (p. 330)

Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) acknowledged one example of an initiative being used in the field at the time of their study:
…evidence of widespread adoption of a learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda) does not appear in the data. Given the ways that new professionals with orientations toward internal leadership or self-directed learning described coping with challenges in the workplace, we recommend continued exploration of this aspect of graduate education and transition to full-time employment. (p. 330)

This study utilized Baxter Magolda’s Learning Partnership Model (LPM) (2004a) as the basis of the Success Coaching practice graduate students use to work with undergraduate students. As graduate students are themselves students, they apply the LPM with undergraduates and experience the LPM. This unique graduate assistantship experience hopes to add to the literature on the LPM’s use in a Success Coaching center and the Success Coaching role.

In this literature review, I have discussed graduate assistantships, their role, and their contribution to the bureaucratic higher education institution. I have presented information about graduate students who work in these essential assistantship roles, along with the challenges and benefits they face in their multifaceted positions. I then spoke about coaching and its entry and growth into the HE landscape as a support service to assist student retention, success, and persistence. Lastly, I examined information about Success Coaching, its unique qualities as a support service, and the need to define the specificity of the Success Coaching model used for this research study.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this final segment of Chapter 2, I present the theoretical framework for this study, which utilizes (see Figure 1 below) the constructivist paradigm, self-authorship theory, and transformative learning theory to understand the experience and benefit of a graduate assistantship for graduate students working with undergraduate students. At the particular site
that this study focuses on, graduate students use Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Learning Partnership Model (LPM) in their coaching work with undergraduates. At this site, a Success Coach’s goal is to create a learning partnership through goal setting and self-reflection to empower students in their college experience. The coaching training includes using critical thinking practices to engage undergraduates. As graduate students utilize these methods and skills in their work, and as adult learners engaged in their educational pursuit, the coaching experience has the potential to impact their growth.

Figure 1

*Theoretical Framework for Research Study and Graduate Student Experience*

In the next section, I present a diagram of my theoretical framework that displays the elements which make up the graduate student experience. First, I define constructivism and the role it plays in graduate student development. Next, I explain self-authorship and the factors that influence self-authorship. I then talk about the Learning Partnership Model and its role in the
graduate assistantship Success Coaches’ experience. Finally, I discuss the transformative learning theory that brings together all the experiences that work to influence Success Coaches’ growth.

**Constructivism**

The Success Coaching Center (SCC) in this study employs the constructivist philosophy to train Success Coaches and their approach to work with students who utilize SCC services. Rooted in interpretivism, the constructivist paradigm and its practice are popular in research, teaching, and learning (Adom et al., 2016). The two types of constructivism used in teaching and learning include Piaget’s cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky’s social constructivism (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Piaget’s cognitive conception of learning is based on the idea that learning is individualistic based on our own experiences. Humans construct knowledge based on their thoughts and ideas (Wadsworth, 1996). Social constructivism believes ideas are constructed through social exchanges with others (Kalina & Powell, 2009). Cognitive and social constructivism involve active learning (Bada & Olusegun, 2015) through experiences like a graduate assistantship.

Social constructivism is student-centered and based on the notion that knowledge construction is accomplished by the interaction that occurs within yourself through reflection and the interaction that occurs through interaction and collaboration with other people (Vygotsky, 1980). Through active engagement, learners are forced to exchange ideas and negotiate meaning by examining and reflecting on multiple perspectives that others present (Murphy et al., 2005). In the Success Coaching partnership, both undergraduate and graduate students bring their own cognitive and social understanding along with their collective experiences into the coach–coachee relationship.
Constructivist learning theory has been applied in higher education in graduate work with undergraduates (Narayan et al., 2013). Graduate students come to the graduate assistantship role with their own epistemological assumptions and skills that have served them well in their undergraduate experience. Through their assistantship role, they get the opportunity to learn and practice new skills. In their work with undergraduate students, Success Coaches are required to reflect and assess the needs of undergraduate students through meetings, administrative tasks, and discussions with their supervisors.

**Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship suggests that entry into young adulthood is complex, and young adults require a capacity for self-authorship to meet societal expectations. Baxter Magolda (1999) states that her “constructive developmental pedagogy” approach assumes that students construct knowledge by making meaning from their own experiences.

The goal of self-authorship is to apply the process of self-reflection to help organize one’s thoughts and feelings to form an opinion or decision (Blimling, 2002). Baxter Magolda constructed a pedagogical approach to self-authorship based on three principles: validating students as knowers, situating learning in students’ own experience, and defining learning as mutually creating meaning. When students are validated as knowers, they are recognized as capable, and their viewpoint is respected. Situating learning in students’ own experiences involves using students’ experiences as the starting point for learning to help students build on what they already know. Defining learning as mutually constructing meaning requires both teacher and student to share the learning process. Together, students and faculty members make meaning of experiences based on the available evidence (Blimling, 2002). In the context of this
study, the Success Coach engages with the undergraduate student to make meaning of the individual coaching need.

The journey toward self-authorship involves moving students from externally focused dependence to internally focused reliance on self to make decisions. This process involves moving students from depending on others for answers to questioning authority and recognizing multiple perspectives to develop an internal belief system. The last phase involves solidifying one’s internal beliefs which are consistently utilized to guide decisions. Through her first longitudinal research study, Magolda (1992) concluded that few undergraduates move from the second to the third phase during their undergraduate years. Magolda (1996) found that self-authorship happened after students had the chance to consistently practice decision-making, which happens after undergraduates leave college and navigate life decisions.

In Magolda’s (1996) study examining epistemological development in graduate and professional education, graduate students identified opportunities that created contextual learning in a teaching/learning environment from their experience in graduate and professional education. To promote contextual knowing, a learning environment should involve:

1. capitalizing on students’ experience,
2. creating particular experiences that students have not encountered,
3. framing class discussion that encourages the analysis of existing knowledge and personal biases,
4. asking students to support their beliefs in discussions and papers,
5. assignments that involve analyzing one’s beliefs in the light of relevant knowledge, and
6. serving as a moderator for students to engage in these activities. Perhaps more importantly, directly communicating to students the importance of exploring their own thinking and the difficulty of such a task might help them begin to engage in it. (p. 302)
The graduate assistantship role offers Success Coaches the opportunity to engage in many of the practices listed above. Through their academic coursework, graduate students may encounter additional opportunities to engage in the practices listed.

**Learning Partnership Model**

The Success Coaching Center uses Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Learning Partnership Model (LPM) as a coaching model to work with students who utilize Success Coaching services. The LPM serves as a solid foundation to guide students toward self-authorship. Three main principles make up the LPM. It validates students as knowers, situates learning in students’ experiences, and defines learning as mutually constructing meaning (Pizzolato, 2006). In the context of the Success Coaching Center, the coaches work in an academic support role. By adhering to the three main principles, the partnership allows students and coaches to mutually construct meaning where challenging questions or situations and supportive action exist together. Graduate students create a learning partnership with the students they coach and apply the coaching techniques that promote critical thinking and self-reflection in their work as Success Coaches.

The SCC emphasizes goal setting during Success Coaching training. Setting goals helps students think through what they would like to achieve in using coaching services. Cognitive coaching techniques are used to force student reflection with challenges they face in college. This challenge and support methodology helps students reflect and practice their critical thinking skills. In the SCC’s role as a support service to the university, developing resilience and critical thinking in students helps meet mission goals and contributes to student success and retention.

Graduate assistants receive training on using the LPM. As they engage with undergraduates and practice the three principles of the LPM, they integrate self-authorship theory into practice. Their work involves critical review and reflection of student needs. As
previously mentioned, the Center employs the LPM in its design and practice. This includes professional development and mentorship of graduate assistants. The graduate assistants are themselves integrated into a learning partnership with the center as it encourages graduate assistants’ self-authorship and self-reflection, situates learning in learners’ experiences, shares commitment to inclusiveness, includes constructive collaboration, and offers adequate challenge and significant support as part of the graduate assistants’ experience through training, one-on-one meetings with their supervisor, and weekly staff meetings. The Center utilizes elements of synergistic supervision to support graduate assistants. According to Shupp and Arminio (2012), “synergistic supervision is a process designed to support employees as they actualize the goals of their organization and advance their leadership development. Its purpose is to promote the mastery of the student affairs craft” (p. 158).

Miami University has utilized the LPM to promote self-authorship in graduate education, professional staff, and faculty development. Students have reported they learn a great deal about themselves, practice collaboration with others, hone their critical analysis and examine multiple perspectives, and self-author professional beliefs (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Situated in adult educational learning theories, transformative learning theory helps to understand how adults make meaning in their lives. Mezirow (1997) stated that there was a process in transformative learning. “The process involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Irby et al. (2013) offered that it is a “process in which we use prior experiences and interpretations to form new or revised interpretations to make meaning and guide future action” (p.134).
Through perspective transformation, which involves reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection, adults make meaning of their daily life experiences. Perspectives include beliefs, values, and assumptions of our lived experience and how we internalize or make sense of that information (Dirkx, 1998). Without critical reflection, perspectives can limit our worldview. Through critical reflection it is possible to redevelop important beliefs of our viewpoints. According to Dirkx (1998), acquiring new knowledge through new learning or new experiences provides opportunities to reconstruct “various aspects of one’s self and one’s relationship with the world” (p. 9). According to Mezirow (2000), transformation can be incremental and ongoing through an accumulation of changes to making meaning scenarios or it can be dramatic through a disorienting dilemma. However, through critical reflection and discourse, the experience can result in a revised worldview.

Dirkx (1998) stated, “Through educative experiences learners engage and confront novel situations which question their existing assumptions, beliefs, values, or images of themselves or the world” (p. 9). As graduate assistants move through their experience as students, participate in experiential learning experiences as part of their curricular program, work with undergraduates in their graduate assistantship, prepare for the post-graduate professional world, and navigate their personal lives, there are many opportunities to engage in critical thinking of prior assumptions as they acquire and assimilate new knowledge. Navigating the complex role and responsibility as a graduate student working in a graduate assistantship has potential to contribute towards transformational learning.

My Conceptual Framework: An Integration of Theories

Both self-authorship and transformative learning theories are used to gain deeper understanding of post-baccalaureate student experiences. Collay and Cooper (2008) used Baxter
Magolda’s (1998, 2004) self-authorship theory to explore women’s experiences in two graduate programs designed to support transformational learning of educational leaders. Unyapho (2011) used transformative learning theory to study educational experiences of international doctoral students to examine how they make meaning of their educational experience.

Both self-authorship and transformational learning acknowledge prior student learning, recognize student knowledge construction, and share the importance of critical reflection to engage internal beliefs of students. In speaking about twenty-first-century educational goals, Baxter Magolda (2007) speaks to the importance of moving students from following formulas to creating environments that expose students to diverse perspectives and challenge them to think about their beliefs, identities, and values. Baxter Magolda (2001b) stated, “Twenty-first-century learning outcomes require self-authorship: the internal capacity to define one’s belief system, identity, and relationships” (p. 69). Moving students to become critical thinkers who can figure out their own voice “requires transformational learning or how we learn to negotiate and act on our purposes, values, feelings, and meaning rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69; Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

The goal for graduate students serving in a graduate assistantship as a Success Coach is to empower students. They do so by working with students to develop critical thinking and self-reflection through the coach–coachee partnership. It is equally as important for graduate students to engage in self-reflection and critical thinking. As students themselves, they encounter challenges that can bring their lived assumptions into question. They also have opportunities to reflect on their assumptions and reframe them into more complex frames of reference as they practice these skills in their graduate assistantship experience. Upon graduation, there is potential
for paraprofessional graduate students to continue to apply these new skills in their early careers and their growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives.

Summary

The role of a graduate student serving in a Success Coaching role as part of their graduate assistantship is complex. Many forces and factors influence the development of the graduate student during their graduate studies. These include the graduate program, the higher education institution, the Success Coaching program, their Success Coaching supervisor, the students they serve, other employment, and their personal situations. All these factors can pose challenges as these adult learners navigate their graduate experience and prepare for post-graduate life. This study hopes to understand the Success Coaching experience and hopes to add to the literature about Success Coaching graduate assistantships and their influence as the new professionals enter their post-graduate life. In the following chapter, I detail the chosen site for this qualitative case study as well as the details of my methodology.
Chapter 3

The aim of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of graduate students who trained and served as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship at a midsized public institution located in the mid-Atlantic region. This chapter describes the research design and methods applied in this qualitative case study, followed by details on research participants, description of the setting, instrumentation, procedures, data collection and analysis, validity, researcher bias, and generalizability, and concludes with triangulation for this study.

Research Design

Using qualitative case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 1998) methodology, I examined the long-lasting influence on graduate students who worked in a Success Coaching role as part of their graduate assistantship. I endeavored to learn which skills graduate students who served as Success Coaches found beneficial, and how these skills are utilized and applied professionally after graduation. I sought to understand if coaching skills practiced with undergraduate students during the graduate students’ Success Coaching experience translate to their growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation professional and personal lives.

Merriam (1998) offered: “Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 47). In qualitative studies, the researcher explores the phenomenon under study and collects data in the form of participant comments, statements, or thoughts. According to Cresswell and
Guetterman (2019), qualitative researchers intentionally select individuals and settings for data collection to understand the common phenomenon experienced by research participants. The researcher uses general questions and presents answers or data in the form of participant words and thoughts. Data is analyzed for themes and examined subjectively (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Of all the specific approaches that fall under a qualitative approach, I used case study. Yazan (2015) offered that “case study is one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies” (p. 134). According to Creswell et al. (2007), Yin, Merriam, and Stake are the most influential authors in case study methodology who laid out case study research procedures one can follow. However, there are differences in Yin (2002), Merriam (1998), and Stake’s (1995) approaches to conducting a case study.

**Case Study**

Yin (2002) defined a case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context;” Stake (1995) defined a case as “a specific, a complex, functioning thing…an integrated system which has a boundary and working parts;” and Merriam (1998) defined a case as, “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries and it can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy and so on” (as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 148).

I chose Merriam’s case study approach as it aligns with the constructivist philosophical basis for my overall research design. The theoretical framework for this study embraced constructivism and positioned best with the methodology outlined by Merriam in conducting a case study. This case studied a group of graduate students who experienced a Success Coaching
graduate assistantship phenomenon. While the group underwent the same experience, each person in the group may have experienced the phenomenon differently based on their lived experience. Merriam’s definition of a case study allowed the flexibility to understand the Success Coaching experience of graduate students as a group and individually.

Merriam (2009) stated “qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 39). In the context of this case study, meaning and understanding were sought from the graduate students who experienced Success Coaching. As the researcher, I looked to understand the participants’ perceptions and meaning of their experience. As the primary data collector and analyzer, I was able to expand on graduate students’ understanding through nonverbal and verbal communication. I have also been a part of the Success Coaching Center and so brought an insider perspective, which can be advantageous during data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data collected through an inductive process is meaningful in the form of themes or concepts which evolve from the participants’ experience. Lastly, the data collected was rich in description through participants’ own words and expressions, meaning it was drawn from the participants who experienced the phenomenon.

The Success Coaching experience was unique to the group of students studied. A case study approach using semi-structured, individual interviews was employed to gather data to gain a deeper understanding of the early professionals’ experiences as Success Coaches. To delve deeper into the graduate student experiences, semi-structured interviews were utilized. A qualitative case study design was employed to gain a better understanding of how the skills professionals identified as being valuable translated to their professional and personal growth,
and if those skills influenced their own growth and development (self-authorship). A researcher conducting a qualitative case study can offer an in-depth understanding into the research since they understand the case thoroughly as they collect and analyze the data (Merriam, 2009).

The following questions guided the study:

1. What knowledge and skills did graduate students develop and practice in their early careers from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience?
2. What was the nature of transformational learning that Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate internship during their master’s degree program?
3. How do coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students and practiced with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship contribute to paraprofessionals’ growth and development (self-authorship)?

**Participants**

The study solicited participation from a convenient, criterion sample of paraprofessionals who worked as graduate student Success Coaches during the 2019–2020 or 2020–2021 academic years as part of a graduate assistantship while earning a master’s degree at a public university. The two years were selected because the prior coaching program was structured differently than the program under this study period.

The professionals who were asked to participate in the study completed a ten-hour training for coaching undergraduate students prior to the Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters and worked as Success Coaches during the respective academic year. There were 18 potential participants identified to participate in the study, 14 individuals responded, 12 met the participation criteria, and 11 individuals participated in the individual interviews. Former Success Coaches were solicited for participation through email (see Appendix A).
Selection Criteria

To be included and chosen to participate in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Participants had to be 18 years of age or older.

2. Participants had to have completed a ten-hour training for coaching undergraduate students in Fall 2019 and/or Fall 2020.

3. Participants had to have completed a graduate assistantship as a Success Coach at the public university during the 2019–2020 or 2020–2021 academic years.

4. Participants had to have graduated from a master’s degree program at the public university by Summer 2021.

5. Participants had to be currently employed, completing hours required for certification in their field of practice, or pursuing further studies for the Fall 2021 semester.

6. Participants had to have completed the Informed Consent form.

If a former graduate student met the criteria to participate and decided to take part in the study, they had an opportunity to review eligibility criteria and an Informed Consent document (see Appendix B). The document was a Qualtrics survey that described the study and the criteria to participate. In addition, participating students were asked to provide some demographic information.

Description of Setting

The institution used for the study is located in a suburb outside a metropolitan city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The institution is a public university that is a part of a multiple-university state system. The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. As of Fall 2020, total enrollment was approximately 17,700 with a 77% six-year
graduation rate and an 85% first-year to sophomore retention rate (UNIVSTATS, 2019). Success Coaching is a service offered through the public university’s student support center. The student support center provides academic support through tutoring and academic success coaching services to promote independent and active learners at the public university.

**Success Coaching Center**

The Success Coaching Center (SCC) at the institution grew out of a program called EXCEL (pseudonym), designed to work with first-year students with identified risk factors. Students identified as being at risk of not graduating in six years were required to meet regularly with a Coach to increase their success rate. In addition to the at-risk first-year student population, Coaches also worked with academic probation students (students whose cumulative GPA fell below a 2.0 at the end of a semester).

In Fall 2019, the program changed, and Success Coaching was opened to all incoming first-year and transfer students. In addition to working with academic probation students, all Coaches worked with students identified through an early student alert program where professors referred students they felt were at risk of falling behind in class. In Fall 2020, Success Coaching services were made available to all undergraduate and graduate students at the public university.

**Success Coaches**

Success Coaches worked with students on goal setting, time management, test preparation, note-taking, textbook reading, motivation, self-care, how to navigate course scheduling, issues related to college adjustment, locating college resources, how to communicate with professors, and more. As a result of the global pandemic in Fall 2020, Success Coaches received additional training to provide virtual coaching services and assist campus students in
their adjustment to virtual learning. The Success Coaching program at the public university typically hires 14–17 Success Coach graduate students a year.

**Recruitment**

Potential participants for this study were solicited using email. The email addresses for the graduated Success Coaches were part of contact records the Success Coaching Center keeps at the public university. At the end of their graduating year, the former Success Coaches were asked to complete future contact information so that the SCC could send the graduate students congratulatory cards upon their graduation. Potential participants were sent a recruitment email (see Appendix A) soliciting former Success Coaches’ participation in the dissertation research study. The recruitment email described the study and the criteria required to participate in the study.

**Instrumentation**

I chose a qualitative case study methodology using semi-structured interviews for this research study as it is well positioned to capture the lived experience of graduate students participating in the coaching process. Graduate students have unique identities and experiences they bring to the Success Coaching graduate assistantship. Each Success Coach experienced the same training and participated in the same Success Coaching assistantship, but how they experienced the phenomenon was unique to the individual. A purposeful sample of students who experienced the Success Coaching phenomenon was chosen to participate in this study. I used three instruments in data collection as described below.

**Qualtrics Survey**

A Qualtrics survey link was included in the email (See Appendix A) soliciting professionals’ participation in the dissertation study. The Qualtrics survey (See Appendix B)
asked participants to provide some demographic information through a questionnaire with 14 questions. The questionnaire asked for biographical data (gender identification and race/ethnicity) and background information about major and the number of semesters spent working as a Success Coach. The professionals who served as Success Coaches earned their master’s degrees in different majors. The purpose of collecting demographic data was to provide some background information on the characteristics of the professionals/former Success Coaches participating in this study. The survey included eligibility criteria as well as the Informed Consent process, completion of which was required to participate in the study.

**Individual Interviews**

Eleven semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted November 2021 to December 2021. Each individual interview included 13 questions (See Appendix C) asking participants about their graduate assistantship as a Success Coach and their post-graduate life. I scheduled individual, one-on-one interviews at a mutually agreed-upon time with the interview participant. Questions covered topics such as skills learned and applied through the Success Coaching assistantship and which skills they valued, used, or applied in their current professional role or in making life decisions. The intention of these questions was to understand if the coaching skills developed and implemented with undergraduate students as part of the Success Coaching assistantship had long-term impacts on these selfsame professionals in their early careers and in terms of their growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews were video recorded through Zoom with transcription and Voice Memos on my iPhone as a backup. Interviews were conducted from a private office space on the university campus or from a private office space in my home.
The individual interview questions (Appendix C) were constructed with phases of self-authorship in mind. The questions were formulated to determine if working as a Success Coach promoted the participant’s growth and development (self-authorship) (Baxter Magolda 2004a; Magolda et al., 2012). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed the “researcher to respond to the situation at hand” and to follow up with questions if it was necessary in the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

Excel spreadsheets and frequency charts were used to manage and organize demographic data. All recordings and transcriptions were kept in a secure cloud location and protected by a password-protected laptop. The data will be deleted approximately three years after the completion of the study, in May 2025.

Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were reminded that they were under no obligation to participate in individual interviews, and that they could stop or withdraw participation at any time. The option to stop was reiterated at the beginning of each interview. Participants were offered collegial support and a list of resources in case any feelings of discomfort in job-related functions as mentioned above emerged. I also explained that their decision to participate or not participate would:

- not affect their relationship with the midsized university in the mid-Atlantic region (this was also mentioned in the informed consent process), and
- not affect their relationship with me.

There was minimal harm or risk for professionals who wished to participate in this study. First, professionals who participated lost one to two hours of their time, instead spending this time in individual interviews. Second, depending on their experience as a graduate assistant, participants may have experienced some emotional discomfort in recounting their assistantship
as a Success Coach. Finally, participants may also have felt some stress or obligation to participate, given their knowledge of my role as their former supervisor at the university. All identifying information was changed to a number to protect the identity of the participant. Participants had the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves. If they did not choose a pseudonym, they were assigned a pseudonym, and this was used in the write-up of my findings.

**Procedures**

An application to the university’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) at the university where I conducted my research was submitted and approved in late Summer 2021. After the IRB approved the dissertation study, I recruited the former graduate students who had worked as Success Coaches electronically through email. Here are details for the recruitment email and informed consent process:

1. I sent a recruitment email (See Appendix A) soliciting former Success Coaches’ participation in the dissertation research study. The recruitment email described the study criteria and participation.

2. If former Success Coaches were interested, they had an opportunity to review the Qualtrics survey (see Appendix B) which included the criteria to participate, the study description, Informed Consent, and a questionnaire asking for demographic information.

3. If participants had any questions or concerns about the study, they were provided with my contact information so that I could follow up with them.

Participant completion of the Qualtrics survey (see Appendix B) indicated agreement of their participation in the research study because it included the Informed Consent process.

**Data Collection Schedule**
After obtaining IRB approval and fulfilling the requirements for the Ed.D. program, the schedule presented in Table 1 was followed for data collection. At the end of October 2021, recruitment emails (See Appendix A) were sent out to potential participants soliciting their participation in the research study. The Qualtrics survey link was included in the email (See Appendix A) soliciting professionals’ participation in the dissertation study. The Qualtrics survey (See Appendix B) included eligibility criteria and consent to participate in the study.

Table 1

Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Research phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2021</td>
<td>Obtained IRB approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2021—mid-November 2021</td>
<td>Obtained informed consent using Qualtrics survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2021—December 2021</td>
<td>Conducted individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2021—February 2022</td>
<td>Analyzed data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The former Success Coach paraprofessionals who met inclusion criteria and provided Informed Consent were contacted via email to participate in individual, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews (See Appendix C). Individual, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted November 2021 to December 2021.

Analysis and Coding Procedures

I used Zoom to conduct one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. I used the transcripts generated from the Zoom transcription verbatim. I edited the transcripts and checked them for accuracy. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the data was anonymized by assigning a
number to each participant. I used two methods to code and analyze the data. In the next section, I present details about my data analysis and the reasoning to support my choices.

**Inductive Coding**

To identify specific skills former Success Coaches developed, skills they found most valuable, and skills they practiced professionally since graduation, I used inductive coding to allow for codes to emerge progressively (Miles et al., 2014) and allow themes to develop from participant data (see Figure 2). Inductive coding allows for a rich description of data to be collected (Braun & Clark, 2006). The open-ended thematic analysis using descriptive, inductive qualitative methods helped me to learn how graduate students across disciplines found skills they learned as part of their Success Coaching assistantship helpful and which skills they applied in their professional practice. This coding method is referred to as first cycle in vivo coding, which involves pulling words or short phrases from the participants’ own language. A second cycle coding or pattern coding was utilized to group the summaries from first cycle coding into a smaller number of categories or themes (Miles et al., 2014).

**Figure 2**

*Theme Development from Data*
Excel was used to assist in coding and data analysis. Second cycle coding was utilized to find major themes or relationships that connected to the theoretical framework. A summative qualitative analysis was presented using narrative data combined with codes and themes to provide a detailed picture of study findings.

**Threats to Validity and Reliability**

Merriam (1998) offered that “assessing the validity and reliability of a qualitative study involves its component parts as you might in other types of research” (p. 199), and we can ask, “were the interviews reliably and validly constructed; was the content of the documents properly analyzed; do the conclusions of the case study rest upon data?” (p.199) in order to confidently conduct and present results of a particular study. Self-reporting allows participants to be honest in evaluating their own level of competence, but response bias can influence self-reporting (Merriam, 1998). As the researcher is an instrument who collects data (Biddix, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), they too can bring their bias into coding the research study.

To address self-reporting bias, all responses were anonymized, and no rewards were offered to boost response rates. As I was a previous supervisor to these alumni, they may have had perceived bias regarding answers they provided. To best ensure honest feedback, interviews were conducted after students had completed their internship as a Success Coach and graduated. Lastly, participants had been removed from their Success Coaching experience for a year or less and that may have affected the feedback they provided regarding the skills they identified from their assistantship.

To mitigate researcher bias, I used anecdotal note forms to take field notes during the interview process to document participant responses, including facial or body movements. I also recorded my thoughts to address my reflexivity as the researcher.
**Internal Validity**

Internal validity concerns truth value where one can question if the study findings make sense. “Are they (findings) credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we are looking at?” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312). According to Merriam (1998), there are six strategies that can improve internal validity. They include triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination, participatory or collaborative modes of research, and researcher biases. To enhance the internal validity of this study, I integrated triangulation, peer examination, and positionality in conducting my research.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation involves collecting data from multiple sources, using multiple methods, and using rich descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). I used one-on-one interviews to capture the experience from the individual Success Coaches. I conducted a robust review of the literature to guide this research study and methodology and ensured the study is steeped in a solid theoretical foundation. Peer examination asks colleagues to examine and comment on findings as they develop, and researcher’s biases involve the researcher to present their worldview and theoretical positioning at the beginning of the study (Merriam, 1998). I consulted with faculty colleagues involved with graduate student assistantships and Success Coaching experience as I conducted interviews and analyzed data to provide feedback in the process. The data shared with faculty colleagues was anonymized using pseudonyms chosen by participants or assigned by me and known only to myself and my faculty advisor.

Through the study, I identified specific skills former Success Coaches developed, skills they found most valuable, and skills they practiced professionally and personally since graduation. The reason for using a qualitative case study design was to gain a better
understanding of how the skills Success Coaches identified as being valuable translated to their professional and personal growth and if those skills have influenced their own self-authorship.

To validate my conclusions, I triangulated the data collected using individual interviews, which resulted in an abundance of descriptive data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I included a rich description of my study along with soliciting peer feedback, and included my positionality to address my biases, assumptions, and dispositions within the study that might influence the conclusion of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasize the importance of including the researcher’s positionality as the researcher is the instrument when conducting qualitative research. Some ethical issues that must be considered include research bias and positionality. With respect to this study, I have contributed to creating the training and trained the Success Coaches in addition to serving as their supervisor during the Success Coaches’ graduate assistantship. At the time of this research study, I was a former supervisor to the former Success Coaches and consider the former Success Coaches as colleagues. I addressed my reflexivity as the researcher by logging my thoughts using field notes to record participant responses, including nonverbal cues during the interview process.

**Generalizability**

Merriam and Grenier (2019) stated, “Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p.27). To put another way, if this study were repeated, would another researcher get the same results? This is hard to achieve in qualitative research that involves human subjects “because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what a single person experiences” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 27). According to Mills et al. (2009), case study research results are challenging to generalize
since observations are contextually relevant to the phenomenon being studied. If a case study approach using methods to collect data included individual interviews, the results would be specific to the case study, but they can be informational to another researcher studying a similar case. If a few researchers attempted to study the impact of similar graduate assistantships and similar conclusions were found, wider applicability might be possible.

Merriam (1998) offered that using “rich, thick description, typicality or modal category and multisite designs” enhanced external validity to assist in the data being generalized. By providing rich, thick description, it would provide other researchers a way to assess if their situations would match enough to be transferrable. Typicality or modal category entails a description of the program, event, or individual so another researcher can compare for similarities. Lastly, multisite designs use more than one site for the study to allow for a diverse collection of data. For this study, I have provided a rich description of the study site and the procedures I used to conduct the study.

Summary

In this qualitative case study, I sought to explore the experiences of graduate students who trained and served as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship. I used semi-structured, individual interviews to gather data to gain a deeper understanding of the early professionals’ experiences as Success Coaches. Through the interviews, I sought to learn how the skills professionals identified as being valuable translated to their professional and personal growth, and if those skills influenced their own growth and development (self-authorship). I provided details about my research design and methods applied in this qualitative case study, followed by details on research participants, setting, instrumentation, researcher bias,
generalizability, data collection and analysis, and the informed consent related to the study. In the following chapter, I present my findings.
Chapter 4

This qualitative case study sought to understand the experiences of graduate students who trained and served as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship at a mid-sized public institution located in the mid-Atlantic region. I solicited 18 former Success Coaches. Of the 14 former Success Coaches who responded to my invitation to participate in the study, 12 met the criteria to participate. I conducted 11 interviews, as one qualified participant could not commit to the time required to participate in the study. The 11 participants worked as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship while completing their master’s degree. In this chapter, I present the findings to the following questions, which guided this study:

1. What knowledge and skills did graduate students develop and practice in their early careers from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience?

2. What was the nature of the transformational learning that Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate assistantship during their master’s degree program?

3. How do coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students and practiced with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship contribute to paraprofessionals’ growth and development (self-authorship)?

Participants

Table 2 includes demographic information about study participants. Most of the former Success Coaches interviewed grew up in the Mid-Atlantic region and attended graduate school there. The students came from varied undergraduate majors, including public health, psychology, political science, management, communications, engineering, and sociology. A majority of the former Success Coaches interviewed were enrolled in a graduate program designed to prepare
for a career in higher education. The rest graduated in programs related to the health fields and human resources.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Semesters worked as Grad. Asst.</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of years worked after graduation</th>
<th>Master’s degree program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brea</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Two years or less</td>
<td>Industrial organizational psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Two years or less</td>
<td>Speech language pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Clinical mental health counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heba</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Two years or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska native</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Two years or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Two years or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potet</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mixed or Multiracial</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scout</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mixed or Multiracial</td>
<td>One year or less</td>
<td>Higher education policy and student affairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional figures below display various demographic characteristics. More than half of the participants interviewed identified as female (Figure 3). Success Coaching was offered during the fall and spring semesters. More than half of the participants interviewed worked as Success Coaches for two years (four semesters), 18% of the participants worked for one year (two semesters), and 18% of the participants worked for one and a half years (three semesters) before graduating from the institution (Figure 4). A little more than half of the former Success Coaches interviewed graduated within the last year and were in their first year of employment in their earned master’s degree field (Figure 5).

Figure 3

Participant Gender
Figure 4

*Number of Semesters Participants Worked as a Success Coach*

- 2 Semesters: 18%
- 3 Semesters: 64%
- 4 Semesters: 18%

Figure 5

*Number of Years Participants Have Been Working Post-Graduation*

- Pursuing further studies: 36%
- One year or less: 55%
- Two years or less: 9%
Participant Background

Below, I provide short narrative descriptions of all 11 participants. I do this to provide background information for each participant interviewed, and I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the interview participants.

Potet is a White male in his 20s, and he completed his graduate studies in May 2021. Potet attended a small private university as part of his undergraduate experience prior to attending the public institution for his master’s degree. Potet worked fully remotely during his Success Coaching experience for two semesters. Prior to Success Coaching, Potet participated in a similar graduate assistantship on campus. At the time of the interview, Potet was working at a private university in the resident life area.

Tom is a Mixed or Multiracial male in his 20s. He graduated in Summer 2021 from a master’s degree program. He attended a small, private college for his undergraduate experience. He majored in an engineering field and he did not want to pursue work in that area for his future career. Minoring in a liberal arts area as an undergrad confirmed his desire for further studies in philosophy. Due to the shutdown of the institution because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tom worked virtually as a Success Coach for two semesters. Supporting students as a Success Coach helped him decide to pursue a career in higher education because he found fulfillment in helping students learn and grow.

Jacob is a White male in his 30s who graduated in May 2020. He grew up on the West Coast and earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at a university on the West Coast. He completed his second master’s degree when he worked as a Success Coach to enter higher education as a professional. Jacob worked as a Success Coach for three semesters before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, so his experience was all in person. Jacob currently supports
students in the advising area at a private university located in a metropolitan city in the mid-Atlantic region.

Brea is a White female in her 20s who graduated in May 2020 and worked for the Success Coaching program for three semesters. She helped in an administrative role for two semesters, but the Success Coaching role piqued her interest, so she pursued the role to work as a Success Coach, which she completed in-person for one semester. She transferred as an undergraduate and completed both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the same institution. Brea works in the human resources area of a private company that provides human resources support to other companies.

Maia is a White female in her 20s who graduated in May 2020 having completed her undergraduate degree at a public institution. She worked for a year before deciding to change course to pursue a master’s degree and work in higher education. After graduating, Maia moved to the South and worked at a small, private university as an academic success coach. Within a year, she moved back to the mid-Atlantic region and currently lives in a metropolitan city working for a private university in the academic services area.

Oscar is a White male in his 20s. He graduated in May 2020 from a big, public institution in the mid-Atlantic region with a management background for his undergraduate degree. After graduating with his master’s degree, Oscar moved to the Midwest to work for a public institution as an academic advisor. Within a year, Oscar moved back to the mid-Atlantic region and currently works at a private university in a metropolitan city in the career advising area.

Dawn is a White female in her 20s who graduated in May 2020 after attending two different undergraduate institutions. She worked for two years in various business and retail positions before pursuing a master’s degree to work with students in higher education. After
graduation, Dawn moved to the West. She currently works for a company that recruits students for a private university located in the Northeast region of the United States.

Maia, Oscar, and Dawn worked as Success Coaches for four semesters. I group together these coaches because they worked the same four semesters and graduated together. The program was structured differently during their first year compared to their second year. They experienced working as a Success Coach both in person and virtually due to COVID. Maia, Oscar, and Dawn also experienced working with other campus offices as part of internship experiences. During their time together, the three forged a friendship that influenced their post-graduation experiences.

Heba is a Black or African American female, in her 20s. She graduated in May 2021 after attending a rural public institution as an undergraduate and was involved in mentorship and student support roles during her undergraduate studies. She worked as a Success Coach for four semesters, and she experienced the Success Coaching role in-person and virtually. Heba was a popular Success Coach with a regular slate of students who consistently worked with her. Heba works as a behavior therapist for a health system outside a major city in the Northeast.

Kat is a Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native female in her 20s. She graduated in May 2021, having transferred into the institution as an undergraduate, and worked in a student support role before starting her master’s degree and graduating from the public institution. As an undergraduate of the institution, her knowledge helped her work with students in her Success Coaching role. Kat worked as a Success Coach for four semesters and experienced the role in-person and virtually. Kat currently works in advising at a two-year public college.
Scout is a Mixed or Multiracial female in her 20s. She graduated in May 2021, having completed her bachelor's and master’s degrees at the public institution. Scout worked as a Success Coach for four semesters and experienced the role in-person and virtually. Scout shared why she chose her majors as an undergraduate and graduate student. “I was so interested in understanding people, but I think it was mostly because I wanted to understand myself. But for higher ed., I wanted to go into higher ed. [just] because [I thought of a] I always thought that being on a college campus is where I felt the most hopeful about the future, and I kind of wanted to be part of that.” Scout currently works in a blended role that encompasses residential services and academic coaching at a small private college serving a diverse population of students.

Elizabeth is a White female in her 20s who graduated Summer 2021, having attended the public institution for her undergraduate and graduate studies. She worked as a Success Coach for four semesters and experienced in-person and virtual settings. Elizabeth came from a strong background in public speaking, which led to her pursuit of a career related to communication sciences. Elizabeth currently works in a hospital setting with adult speech language and swallowing populations.

**Skills Developed From Success Coaching**

Working with undergraduate students as a Success Coach involved managing a caseload of students. Success Coaches assessed student needs, solicited goals from students, and designed plans to meet their goals. Success Coaches were trained to work holistically with undergraduate students to empower them towards working independently. I asked participants about the knowledge and skills they developed from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience and which skills they found most useful in their early careers. Through analysis of the interview transcripts, I identified several common skills. I further explored the skills articulated
in the interviews and found they could be separated into three categories: professional, interpersonal, and personal impact. Below, I present the common skills that former graduate student Success Coaches described.

**Professional Skills**

Former Success Coaches expressed they developed professional skills such as communication, time management, identifying campus resources for referrals, and navigating the bureaucracy of institutions. Below, I highlight some of the professional skills former Success Coaches mentioned explicitly as being personally helpful and valuable in their first professional roles.

**Communication and Time Management.** More than half of the former Success Coaches interviewed talked about the value of time management and communication skills. Communication skills were highlighted in helping to assess student needs, build rapport with students, and develop listening skills to engage students. Below, Scout, Kat, Heba, Maia, Tom, and Jacob voiced why these specific skills and others were valuable and how they have applied these skills in their respective personal and professional lives. Brea also gave insight into her personal struggles with public speaking and how practicing these skills with undergraduate students benefitted her.

Scout works at a four-year university that served a diverse population of students. She spoke about the importance of being able to assess a student’s need, which she identified as a valuable skill. “[I figured] out what questions to ask students, so I could figure out how I can be helpful.” Scout also mentioned specific skills she found helpful in working with students in her current role:
I feel like everything that we did, I do here! Like the workshops, teaching them the
different skills, so time management, textbook reading, and stuff like that. Organization.
Organizational skills, time management, interpersonal skills, active listening (vigorously
nodding head).

Aside from skills she used to work with students in her role, she also included something she
practices herself in her professional role. “I know we had that time management chart. I use that,
and I intentionally put in time for self-care.”

Kat found her experience working with probation students as a Success Coach helpful as
she adapted to her current role as an academic advisor. Kat felt the experience helped her adapt
to working with students from diverse situations, which she found more plentiful at a community
college than at a four-year college. She also felt that she utilized the skills learned in Academic
Success Workshops (ASW) through Success Coaching. ASWs covered topics such as time
management, self-care, procrastination, etc., in more detail to teach students in-depth techniques
to help themselves become more adept in those areas. Kat discussed specific skills she found
helpful in her current role in advising at a two-year public institution where she has been
working for about one year:

Case management aspect[s] like the data collection, notetaking, scheduling, [and] the
follow-up. The confidentiality part…helping them grow within their academic (pause)
outside of academic goals…academic follow-up, and creating a plan and discussing their
goals, especially when it comes to change of major. [Also] the time management and
organizational activities.
Communication skills are essential in creating a meaningful working relationship to help students. Heba shared how practicing this skill with undergraduate students translated to her work with patients in a clinical setting:

Rapport building has been another one that I’ve used from Success Coaching to my field. Time management skills is also another one that a lot of my patients are struggling with. I’ve been able to use my Success Coaching tools to help them with that as well.

Brea talked about her challenges with public speaking through high school, undergraduate, and graduate programs. Brea expressed how working as a Success Coach helped her public speaking and applying time management skills. She spoke about the personal and professional impact of practicing communication skills as well as applying time management skills developed as she helped students with their own time management skills:

I had the hardest time with public speaking. I really just did not love it, and it gave me a lot of confidence there. So, like on a personal level, having that time where you're talking to people all the time, helps with that public speaking, and running meetings, and plan[ning] short sessions at work. Like if you have an hour to get something done and you kind of [develop] a structured plan for that.

Maia found that her Success Coaching experience with undergraduate students enhanced her communication and listening skills. Maia added that through the ASW presentations, she learned to be adaptable as she practiced her problem-solving skills in her work with students and enhanced her communication skills as she worked with other departments on campus.

Tom added that the Success Coaching experience helped him “engage with students and have conversations” with high school students in his current tutoring role. He credits two skills he finds helpful in his current work. “Learning to making study schedules for them and keeping
them on track has also been a part of what I do, which has translated over pretty nicely from Success Coaching.”

Jacob also felt his role as a Success Coach gave him insight into how he approached his work with students he currently advises at a university. “I think I learned a lot [about] helping to support students, and you know understanding what type of time commitments they need to have for school.” Some of the skills Jacob mentioned students needed to have included:

How to organize themselves around their school schedule, how to prioritize, you know, set goals, and [and] prioritize their academics, while they are also trying to, you know, to be well rounded and be involved in campus activities and just different parts of [of] student life.

Jacob also talked about the emphasis the Success Coaching program placed on working with students as individuals and how to broach working with students one-on-one:

It was always emphasized that we meet the students where they are and that we focus on what this particular student needs, so it’s very individualized, student to student. It’s not a one size fits all…so first part is, just to kind of investigate what the actual issue, and then, based off of the understanding of what might be taking place, then what if. What, I guess actions, or plan can we set up working one-on-one?

Jacob feels his role as a Success Coach helped him better navigate conversations and start conversations with advisees to explore areas that can hinder student success. Overall, the Success Coaches related that practicing communication and time management skills with undergraduate students taught them to engage with others in ways that led to better professional relationships in
their respective work environments. Time management skills helped them in their professional roles with managing their time as well their self-care.

**Campus Resources and Institutional Bureaucracy.** Participants talked about the importance of learning about campus resources to assist students in navigating the bureaucratic institution. Jacob, Scout, and Heba spoke about the importance of having that knowledge to make appropriate referrals as a Success Coach and as professionals. Potet added how that experience translated from a student perspective to a new professional employed in higher education.

Jacob described the Success Coaching role to be like mentorship. He elaborated that the role offered support to students to achieve their academic goals and help students locate resources at a university, “to kind of navigate through the various systems and resources that are available. Because universities, you know, [are] giant bureaucracy, [with] a lot of different departments, and a lot [is] available to [the] student.” He elaborated that students are not aware of all the resources available on campuses, and a Success Coach can help guide students to the appropriate resources. Scout also talked about learning about the resources available to students at the institution to make appropriate referrals.

Heba mentioned how knowing about available resources on campus for student referrals has translated to the counseling services arena. “The resources are a bit different…[in] Success Coaching, we connected with a lot of different departments. In my current field, I’ve used my skills from that, to like, navigate patients [to counseling-related resources].”

Potet spoke about the graduate assistant role’s importance in transitioning to a professional role in higher education. Potet expressed that working in the Success Coaching role offered him some familiarity with what to expect in a full-time professional role. “Even though it
was only part-time…it gave you a little bit of a peek behind the curtain from being a student to being a professional, and I think that helped with me adapting to my position here.’’

When asked if the role helped in navigating some challenging experiences in his professional role, Potet offered:

A little bit, with like, not being as surprised, as to the structure of the university, and the politics of the university, and all that stuff we learned from [names professor in his graduate program]. I feel like a lot of it is relevant for sure.

**Interpersonal Skills**

Some former graduate students also offered insight into the personal impact of the Success Coaching role and how they have benefitted from skills they learned and practiced with undergraduates. Personal skills former Success Coaches cultivated during their graduate assistantship included building self-confidence, learning to trust their ideas and opinions, working with others, and building interactive skills. Elizabeth, Oscar, Dawn, and Potet described these skills in a way that suggests they are interconnected. Success Coaches used a blend of these skills in adjusting to their current professional roles; a description of these integrated skills is best presented in the narrative format below.

Elizabeth talked about the impact of working as a team as a Success Coach and how it influenced the approach she took in her current professional role. “I like to work as part of a team, I like to keep things very functional, so the patient is a part of my team, just as a student was, and then I also work with other professionals.”

In addition to learning about institutional systems, Oscar learned about caseload management. He discovered his preferences were “really knowing about myself, and what I enjoy, and the helping professions role as well.” Oscar also mentioned that he “learned a lot of
interpersonal skills, a lot of emotional intelligence skills.” Oscar described a valuable skill he attained, which includes how to confront difficult situations:

The outright idea of just confrontational skills to have, when it’s like, you know, you want to have that soft touch, but there are times where it’s like, alright, the softness is not getting through, so you gotta figure out how to deliver a wakeup call, that was a big thing.

Dawn expressed how working in a Success Coaching role helped her overcome her self-doubt. She spoke about negative self-talk. “I’ve always been my worst critic. I always feel like I [seem like] I don’t know what I’m talking about. Or I come across as ‘stupid’ and I don’t know why I feel like that.” By working with students in her Success Coaching role, Dawn felt, “I really learned to trust my ideas, [and] trust my opinions.”

Potet agreed with Dawn and offered, “…definitely think my interpersonal skills. Certainly, came a long way with those, but I think I definitely developed them in a variety of different ways.”

**Personal Impact**

Graduate students also offered insight into the impact of the Success Coach role and how they have benefitted from skills they learned and practiced with undergraduates. In the narratives below, participants talked about specific skills from their experience as a Success Coach that helped them ease into their professional role. As these were personally impactful to individual Success Coaches, Heba, Brea, Elizabeth, and Maia’s experiences are presented in a narrative form with the participant’s unique skill.

With great enthusiasm, Heba described the most valuable skills that helped ease her entry into her work environment in the counseling area. “Everything! (animated) Like I can’t even
stress it enough, keeping records of patients, well at the time, like the students that we had.”

Heba related that documenting her student meetings as a Success Coach helped her ease into the intense patient documenting she had to complete within the counseling field. Heba felt that the Success Coaching experience “was like a training…it was amazing, and my boss raves about it. They’re like, ‘You’re amazing, you’re keeping [a] chart of everything.’”

Brea talked about working with students and how it helped her interact with colleagues in her professional role. Brea stated that working as a Success Coach honed her people skills. “In managing, like interpersonal relationships, I think it’s been extremely helpful.” Brea described how she applied the skills she learned working with undergraduate students in her professional role in the human resources area. She shared that while you got practice working in groups with your peers in graduate school, peers could be your friends, and the dynamic is different with your coworkers. She elaborated, “You have to learn how to have these professional relationships, and it’s just not something you get in grad school. Like, you have your teachers who are your superiors, and you have your peers who are your friends.” Brea emphasized that managing her personal relationships with her current professional team has been easier because of her graduate assistantship.

Elizabeth works in a hospital setting in her professional role. She offered her insight into skills she uses in her work with stroke patients. “We work on a lot of cognitive skills that are very, very similar to the skills that I had worked on in Success Coaching.” Elizabeth explained how teaching undergraduate students’ organizational skills translated easily into her work with patients. “Being able to really be flexible, with their plans and things, that is something I work on [on] a daily basis.” Elizabeth used deductive reasoning skills in her current work in a similar way to leading students through the critical thinking process as a Success Coach. She summed up
with the following. “I would say all of those high-level cognitive skills would really translate well from being a Success Coach to being a speech pathologist. They definitely led me to being a more confident and competent individual.”

Maia described why working closely with students as a Success Coach had been helpful. “Working so closely with students, it’s very rare in grad assistantship…I was able to have that ability to really, like, know the population, know how to work with students, especially a diverse group of students.” Maia further explained how the close work with students influenced her work. “Like my philosophy, and working with them, and like how I support them, and the holistic view that I was able to get in, working with a variety of them, first-year students, on probation.”

Heba, Brea, Elizabeth, and Maia graduated from four different master’s degree programs and work in four different professional settings. They each found skills they learned and practiced as Success Coaches valuable in their professional settings. They all agreed that applying these valuable skills in their professional setting has helped ease their entry into their professional roles.

**Challenges**

In addition to the professional skills, interpersonal skills, and the personal impact that former graduate students found helpful, participants talked about their challenges. Participants spoke about coaching challenging students, the emotional labor involved in Success Coaching, the personal connections common with students, and the effect of COVID-19 pandemic. I include this section because the experience of navigating trials contributed to the transformation and growth of these former graduate students, which is discussed later in this chapter.
Coaching Challenging Students. Former graduate students were asked about challenging situations they worked through during their Success Coaching experience and if a particular experience with a student stood out in their mind. Dawn and Elizabeth spoke about student situations that made an impression.

Dawn recalled a challenge working with a student who seemed disengaged. Dawn spoke about the experience of working with an 18- or 19-year-old African American male, whom she described as “so sweet and so quiet.” Dawn remembered that the student had no intention of staying at the university and seemed disinterested and depressed. She wondered why the student was there. She offered the student resources and made notes to use in the future if she needed to escalate the issue to her supervisor. Because she did not feel that the student had a sense of purpose for his education, she took a different approach in trying to motivate him:

I started talking to him about leadership opportunities. Because I was coming from the grad level, very liberal program, talking about you know all the current events that are going on with minorities. Like police brutality, anything that anyone was dealing with, we were learning about it in the higher ed scale… that change agent lens. So, I started bringing things up to him and saying, you know, maybe you need a leadership position if you see these things that you want to change in the school. Here are some opportunities. I was really challenging him to start looking at the world the same way that I was. Because he’s living this reality that I’m learning about. But he wasn’t giving me anything, and I was like, okay.

In the end, Dawn shared how she felt about the student’s non-reaction; “I can’t force you to feel oppressed, you know what I mean? I was like balancing on a tightrope, it felt like. So, I would just start talking to him about, you know, things that I was learning about.” When asked how she
would handle working with the same student differently now that she had more work experience and had graduated from her graduate degree program, Dawn stated that she would let the student bring up the subject:

I think just learning about, you know, certain people have different, I would say, lenses on the world. So, maybe I would let him bring it up, without it feeling like, okay, here’s this white woman talking to me about things she has no idea.

Dawn shared why she broached the subject and started the conversation with the student. The student had prompted the conversation by sharing, “I don’t have a lot of Black friends [and] I don't have a lot of friends that are women. It’s just a bunch of White guys.”

Elizabeth recalled a student she met and worked with for the first time in the middle of the semester who faced multiple challenges. She recalled her first conversation when the student stated, “Help! I’m failing every course I’m in!” and told Elizabeth that they had not attended any of their classes for the entirety of the semester. Elizabeth shared that she had to set the tone for the student meeting. Elizabeth did not want to make the student feel like a failure or “put any unnecessary guilt on the student,” as the student already knew they were failing due to not attending class.

Elizabeth had to think beyond the narrative that “people don’t sign up for college and not attend classes for no good reasons.” She dug deeper to find out answers to questions:

Is she food insecure? Is she having some mental health issues right now? Is she really invested in going to college? Is that her primary goal? And then, we also had to come up with the best solution for her.

Elizabeth knew this was not just an academic decision for the student. The student had to consider her personal and financial situation in navigating her next steps. Elizabeth elaborated on
how difficult it was to have such a hard conversation while empathizing with advisees in the Success Coaching role. She shared, “It was sad. It wasn’t an easy thing. And even though it was best for her, the decision she ultimately came to was very difficult.” The student left the Success Coaching center upset, and Elizabeth recounts the experience with another Success Coach asking her, “Why [did] I let a student leave that upset?” It caused Elizabeth to think deeply about her work and led to conversations with her supervisor and peer Success Coaches. She shared:

   It’s so important that we provide a caring atmosphere for our students, but we also can’t lead them on. We can’t let them think that they are going to be able to turn around something when statistically, it’s probably not the case. And we have to be supportive of each other, and it’s okay if not every session is sunshine and daisies. Sometimes that’s what a student needs, and sometimes a student just needs to be allowed to feel sad. Elizabeth did feel she helped the student come to the best decision for herself and concluded, “At the end of the day, you really can’t decide something for a student, so it was her choice to make.” Elizabeth heard back from the student months later through an email and knew “[w]e truly did our best with the information we had, and we did serve that student in the best capacity we possibly could.” Dawn and Elizabeth’s recollections about challenging students they encountered involved using their communication and interpersonal skills to engage the students, as well as thinking through multiple ways to assist students. This thought process involves critical thinking as well as knowing about resources available to direct students accordingly.

   **Emotional Labor.** As a Success Coach, graduate students work with students in all facets of student difficulties. Aside from the academic issues, they confront emotional and psychological concerns. In the narratives that follow, Jacob and Maia spoke about the emotional investment that goes into student support work and how they have handled those responsibilities.
Jacob described the challenges of being in a support role and its effects on him. “I think the challenging parts of the job is really when you’re working with students. You know there’s a transference of anxieties, and I’m already an anxious person, to begin with.” Jacob elaborated, “I’m, you know, really like empathetic and sympathetic to people on their needs.” Jacob noted that it was challenging for him when a student was facing difficult problems:

There’s only so much that you can take responsibility for, you know. The coaching role is more like, you know, guiding someone to what they [student] might need, but you can’t force them to do anything. They have to make those decisions on their own. So, I guess when somebody is going through something that’s emotional, or you know, anxiety-producing, you can end up taking that on. So, I think that there’s, there’s a bit of emotional labor associated with being an academic coach or any support role of a student.

Maia described working with a specific student experiencing multiple challenges simultaneously and what she learned from the situation. Maia still thought about a student she worked with who had a tough time fitting in, facing mental health issues, and adjusting to college and college life in general. Maia recalled, “He wasn’t really going to classes, wasn’t really reaching out to professors.” She worked with him to guide him but felt like she was not coaching him. “I was just kind of there as a listening [post] and trying to make sure that he was getting through the week. I just felt like I wasn’t doing my job, and I wasn’t necessarily like helping him succeed.” As the semester neared the end, she felt that he should not return to the university since he had poor grades and was not attending classes. Maia felt conflicted about her assessment and consulted with the center director. Maia and the center director met with the student and spoke to him about going home and taking some time away. Maia shared her feelings about that meeting:
That was hard for me too. Because I felt like one [of] our supports is retention based, so it was hard for me to say, like, oh I don’t think the student should be here anymore when we’re a retention-based support service. And two, because, I don’t know, it’s hard, that’s a hard decision to make. I got a little too invested, like personally, and I was like, oh my gosh, I’m too invested like this too early on and I don’t know what to do. So yeah, I think that was the most challenging.

I asked Maia if she would handle this situation differently if confronted with the same situation now. Maia offered, “I think I’m more mature now, in the sense of how I work with students. So, I was a student at that time too, like, I was just kind of like feeling for him.” Maia added that she was now better prepared, knew the resources for students of color, and felt more equipped to guide all students according to their individual needs. She indicated, “I do think, because I’m more well versed with students, and a little bit more mature, and how I work with students. I do think I would have taken more of a step back.” Maia still felt like she would be invested in the outcome because that was part of her nature. She felt she would not coddle the student to get through a week but would be focused and say, “All right, let's actually, you know, put a plan together, like get moving on this.”

**Personal Connections.** As students themselves, graduate students confront some of the same obstacles as undergraduate students. In this section, Tom, Dawn, and Scout described their own struggles as students, and Potet shared his experience in finding common ground to connect with a challenging student situation.

Tom recalled a challenge that helped him get through his own graduate experience as he worked to motivate undergraduate students as a Success Coach. In his second year of his master’s program, Tom reflected how he got through the tough times when motivation was
waning as he faced many class assignment deadlines, finishing his master’s thesis, and interviewing. He recalled:

…it was challenging and a little helpful, in the sense that, [a] lot of what I was talking about with the students [undergraduates Tom coached], per se, was [the] motivation for doing the work, and how to get a good momentum going with motivation and doing one thing that leads to the next. And then taking those same lessons and apply[ing] them to myself, for my thesis. So, I think one of my challenging experiences was staying true to kind of what I was.

Dawn talked about her challenges as a student. She struggled with time management and setting boundaries with her availability. Potet recalled working with a student who shared that they had a learning disability. He found it was hard to find common ground and a way to connect, which was personally challenging. “I didn’t know how to handle it at times. Because it was just different, felt different than a lot of the other interactions I had.” He figured out how to work with the student over time. They shared a common interest in a popular book series. Potet elaborated, “I just picked up on little things that like meant a lot to her, and that allowed for me to better connect with her, for her to trust me a little bit.”

Scout talked about her personal struggle in juggling being a graduate student, Success Coaching, and balancing her own feelings. In spring 2020, due to COVID, all Success Coaching services were moved online. Scout shared how this was a struggle overall:

The most challenging thing was when we were doing everything online, and there was a spike in anxiety and depression for students. And a lot of times, the students would use us as an outlet, and at the same time, we were going through the same thing. So, it was kind
of difficult trying to manage my own mental health along with trying, you know, being that level of support for other students.

Scout described her experience with a student she met for weekly study sessions that lasted two hours. She shared how emotionally draining it was for her because she had to spend time listening and showing her different resources and different ways to study. Scout described the toll it took on her. “So that was draining, and then I would have to get off, and then do everything for my thesis, and then you know, then I also had the internship with XYZ college, so it was a lot.” If she had a chance to do it again, Scout offered, “I probably wouldn’t have put so much on my plate.”

As Success Coaches themselves are students, they can relate to the same challenges faced by undergraduate students. As they are engaged in a graduate assistantship to assist undergraduate students, it can be difficult to separate their own thoughts and feelings as they balance their own challenges in their work, graduate school and personal lives. They have to learn to practice boundaries in their work which can be challenging but necessary. Maia and Scout offered how they might handle their challenging situations differently if confronted with the same situation again which demonstrates self-reflection.

Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic. All 11 of the past graduate assistants interviewed mentioned navigating the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as an additional challenge. The former Success Coaches who worked during the 2019–2020 academic year spoke of having to adapt to virtual Success Coaching in March 2020. Success Coaches who graduated in May 2020 entered their first professional positions, where they experienced virtual or remote work rather than in-person work. I highlight three experiences communicated by Heba, Kat, and Oscar in the narratives below that spoke to these challenges.
Heba talked about the challenge of learning about campus resources in her Success Coaching role, the challenge of COVID, and working virtually. Heba was in her first year as a Success Coach when Success Coaching services moved virtually due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Heba had attended another public university for her undergraduate degree, so she felt vulnerable in her role because she did not know enough about the campus resources to make referrals to students. Heba questioned her ability as a Success Coach. She shared the challenge she faced during her second semester of being a Success Coach:

I was learning [about] the campus. It was difficult for me to be able to say okay, like you can go here for, you can go to [the] health center, you can go here, and then boom, COVID happened. So, it was like I barely knew the campus yet and then we went virtual, so it was kind of like okay well, how do I make sure I’m like connecting the students to the resources that they really need and locating them?

Heba leaned on her teammates to learn about campus resources in the virtual environment. The following year, as a third and fourth semester Success Coach, Heba became a mentor to Success Coaches starting in their Success Coaching role.

Kat was working as a second-year Success Coach in March 2020 when Success Coaching went fully remote. Kat had started a new job at a two-year public college in January 2020 and was slated to graduate in May 2020. She had to learn to juggle her responsibilities to finish her degree as she adjusted to the new reality of the pandemic. From January through the summer, Kat had to adjust her life to a different internship than the one she had signed up for, adapt to remote (fully online) classes, and work remotely in the summer. At the end of the summer, Kat learned that her new job would switch from being fully remote to a hybrid model where she would need to be in the office part of the work week. Kat shared how adjusting to the various
situations that year helped her, “It prepared me for that possible switch of plans in the middle of your job, and what you were thinking was going to be your school year.”

Oscar graduated in May 2020 and relocated to the Midwest to begin his first job. He related, “it was very hard to find a gig. I kind of thought beforehand with COVID, yeah, I wanted to move, I thought that would be cool to do and didn’t realize how hard it would be.” He ended up moving to the Midwest and took a position in advising, “because nobody in the Northeast was hiring me, so did that move.” He found the move to be a “major struggle outside of work for the most part, just super isolating, so had to bounce.” Oscar indicated that the institution that hired him assumed he knew absolutely everything about coaching because he had worked as a Success Coach. He worked with probation students and navigated assistance from his graduate assistantship experience. Since no training was provided on institutional policies, Oscar found it challenging because policies differed from his master’s institution.

Oscar relayed that he moved to the Midwest because the hiring institution expected that his role would be hybrid, meaning he would be in-person and virtual at times. Oscar shared, “But even when I showed up to work, I never actually advised a student in person. That was one of the reasons, probably the top reason, that led to me leaving.” Oscar asked, “Why did I have to move?”

Success Coaches provided virtual Success Coaching for the entire 2020–2021 academic year. Some participants mentioned it as part of their Success Coaching experience, and some mentioned it as part of their post-graduate experience. I felt it was essential to provide some detail about the experiences above as it contributed to former Success Coaches’ learning and self-authorship.
Summary of Findings to Research Question 1. Former Success Coaches grew in their knowledge and skills from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship. Through the process of applying their skills with undergraduate students and using the skills to navigate their own challenges, former graduate students found the Success Coaching graduate assistantship valuable professionally and personally. From the challenges they experienced in working with undergraduate students they developed competencies in their professional and interpersonal skills. These experiences helped to grow former Success Coaches’ self-confidence in their professional and personal abilities as they entered their respective professional fields.

Transformational Learning

The second research question for this study sought to investigate the nature of transformational learning that Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate assistantship. In the interviews, participants discussed the influence of their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience and graduate studies as they adjusted to their professional roles after graduating from the institution. Six themes emerged from the interviews where participants shared their experiences about their transition to full-time professional positions. The emerging themes are woven into narratives by the former graduate students interviewed and are presented in the next section. These themes include: comparing job role and satisfaction; being a change agent with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion; experiencing imposter syndrome; having a work-life balance; navigating the system and bureaucracy of higher education institutions; and being the “youngest” on the team.

Comparing Job Role and Satisfaction

Former Success Coaches compared their graduate assistantship experiences to their first professional job settings. Participants reflected on the Success Coaching Center’s organization
and management. They also recalled their supervisory experiences as Success Coaches and with professors as graduate students. Scout and Brea’s interviews highlighted the impact of these experiences as they compared their graduate student roles to their early professional roles.

Scout offered insight into her first professional role by comparing her experiences as a graduate student and Success Coach with the challenges she faced in her new role. She recounted, “I didn’t realize how fortunate we were. How perfectly run [the institution] is, but I wouldn’t know because I wasn’t like, I was not [a full-time employee].” Scout voiced her frustration with communication among departments at her current institution:

There’s a communication barrier between different departments. So, we [referring to staff] have all these ideas, but the ideas don’t matter if we can’t execute, because we’re not actually communicating with the right people. So, I find that we end up repeating ourselves and getting nothing done.

Scout also faced difficult situations in her first professional role. We discussed how prepared she felt to deal with challenges and if her past experiences helped navigate situations. She shared:

I don’t think anyone could’ve prepare[d] me for this place…A lot of it is crisis management. The first week of classes, there was an active shooter. That was really scary. So right outside my window, people were yelling and screaming and running, so I thought the active shooter was outside my apartment, and I was called to go to where the shooter was, and I wasn’t trained on that.

Scout faced extremely difficult situations in her first professional role post-graduation. An active shooter situation would pose a challenge to an experienced professional with many years of experience let alone one with less than one year of full-time experience. Next Brea spoke about her adjustment to her supervisor and new coworkers in her first professional role.
Brea spoke about adjusting to her supervisor and colleagues based on her past experience in the graduate assistantship. She recounted relationships with her supervisors and professors as being supportive and positive as a graduate student. Brea spoke of her struggles adjusting to her current supervisor’s management style and her expectations:

He is tough, and he’s blunt, and he can sometimes be unfair, so navigating that relationship has not been an easy one by any means. That’s definitely not what I expected. I expected it to be a little easier, but I think it’s taught me tenfold about, you know, adapting to your manager and just learning more about you know what he likes.

In working with colleagues, Brea offered how Success Coaching influenced her work. She specifically explained that “it really opened my eyes to [how] people learn differently.” She elaborated about two new employees she had to train. One learned similarly to her, which Brea found easy, so they worked well together. The second had a different learning style, and that proved to be a challenge. Brea used her Success Coaching training to accommodate the second employee’s learning preferences:

I think Success Coaching has helped open my eyes to the fact that [you] just start back in the beginning. Figure out a plan of how this person likes to learn information and how they like to manage their time. I felt like he was not caring about the job when really, we just weren’t aligned on the time management.

Through Brea’s Success Coaching experience, she raised her own awareness about others’ learning styles and being adaptable herself. In her professional role she was able to apply the new learning from her graduate assistantship as a Success Coach.

**Being a Change Agent for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**
Success Coaches who went through the master’s program in higher education and student affairs talked about the connection to their graduate learning with respect to being change agents for diversity, equity, and inclusion work. The master’s program includes courses on theories on college student identity development, issues of power and privilege in higher education, transformative leadership in higher education, and critical action research. In the next section, Maia, Oscar, and Scout talked about their experiences and expectations with respect to professional growth, rigid institutional policies, and contrary student expectations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in their professional positions.

Maia talked about the impact of her professional growth as she navigated and adjusted to two positions within two years of graduating. Maia described her decision to move after graduating, “I decided to move literally almost halfway across the country, but South (motions downward).” She described her experience in the new city as challenging. Due to COVID restrictions, she worked virtually and did not have much contact with colleagues or socialize with others. She made the best of her time by reading books, riding her bicycle to parks, volunteering at an animal shelter, and making a point to visit landmarks in her chosen Southern city. She spent much time by herself and shared, “I think there I grew as a person.” Maia missed being closer to home, so she moved back to the mid-Atlantic area within the year. She secured another position at a private university in a major metropolitan city. In the new position, Maia felt like she was growing professionally:

Now I feel like I’m growing professionally because of what I’m surrounded by. I mean, it’s [names city] there’s a lot of politics. There’s a lot of different things that you’ll experience there that I definitely didn’t experience in [names Southern university]. So, yeah, I think I’m definitely growing professionally. Just in the sense of not working with
students [which], I’ve done. But the antiracist work, the social justice work, that I feel I’m embedded in now is really great. It’s just things that I haven’t had the opportunity to do as much. [I] definitely started at [names graduating university], but I definitely think I’m doing a lot more work now, which I enjoy. So, I think professionally, I’m learning a lot more in this role now than at [names university from South] or before that.

Oscar moved to the Midwest in his first professional role and talked about a student experience that greatly impacted him and caused deep reflection. Oscar described his encounter with an African American male student. “He just popped up on my calendar one day [and] I had no time to prepare and look at it [referring to the student’s college transcript]. I’m like, what is going on with this case?” In looking over the student’s academic record, Oscar noticed the student had a cumulative GPA of 2.48 and had completed 120 total credits, a standard graduating requirement to earn a 4-year bachelor’s degree for most majors in U.S. colleges and universities. But the student couldn’t graduate. Oscar explained:

Because he didn’t register for this really weird, superfluous, zero-credit course that was just a graduation checker, all that you did for it was fill out your survey of what you’re planning to do after graduation and take a small assessment. It wasn’t something you are graded on.

Oscar expressed his anger about the situation. He felt the student had been given “false hope, [was] being lied to, and nobody sat down and [said] listen, you are just hemorrhaging money at this point.” To graduate, the student would have needed to spend more money to take two different classes over the summer and get his cumulative GPA over 2.5 points. Statistically, that was not possible, so the student would need to register for additional courses for the fall semester. Oscar related his thought at having to deliver the news to the student, “I was like what
the fuck is wrong with you people? I don’t even know what to do with myself. He [the student] just looked so hurt, and I’m like rightfully so. I’m hurt too, my guy.” Oscar talked to his director and was told she could not do anything, as that was the university policy. Oscar related his thoughts about delivering the news to the student about the university policy:

We were talking about identities and everything [referring to coursework in his graduate program]. I consider myself White and Middle Eastern, but the White really represents most out of me. So, this dude is pretty much looking at me like I’m one of his classmates who has been granted everything they have. It’s almost like, I’m just the College of Business saying, no, sorry. But I’m acting as an agent who doesn’t want to be there. That particular moment was one where I was like, okay, this is why I’m leaving. There’s a restrictive policy at every school you can look at, but this is one that they refuse to budge on, refused to do anything. I tore them apart in the exit interview, and it definitely didn’t do anything because they wouldn’t listen to me there either. I felt sick. It’s something they could have pulled the plug on.

Oscar felt the university should have been honest in their communication to the student about continuing in the program and not escalated things in the way they did. Oscar felt, “He [student] would have either found another program of interest or would have gotten to another school or even if you [referring to the student] didn’t stay in school, he wouldn’t be accumulating debt, so yeah, not happy.”

Scout worked at a university that served a diverse student body and talked about her expectations in deciding to work there professionally. She talked about her position in a dual resident life and coaching role, “I have a great team.” Scout appreciated that her position allowed her a “blank canvas” to experiment with ideas and implement programs. She felt she could grow
as a professional in her current setting. Scout reflected on some of her expectations. She spoke about the type of students she would encounter versus the reality of the student body. “Because it’s a [diverse serving institution], I thought I was going somewhere where there were students who were extremely excited to learn and use their education as a form of empowerment and to create change.” Scout offered insight into her reality “It’s been a lot of conflict (long pause). What’s the word I’m looking for? I guess, like emergency resolution. There’s a lot of emergencies that occur. There’s always something that’s happening.” Scout offered her thoughts on her professional role, her reality on her ability to create change due to the challenges she has encountered, and coming to terms with others’ lived experiences:

It doesn’t feel like I’m actually able to do what I was hired to do. It could just be because of the pandemic, but there’s a lot of like communication barriers, and students are very angry. So, I’m dealing with a lot of that. Last week, I think we had like three domestic violence cases, so it’s different than [graduate university attended]. I never realized the environments that people grow up in. How they [environments] can be really toxic, in that, the school, is basically, their only salvation. So there [are] a lot of interesting scenarios, like there are students that don’t want to leave for the break because they’re afraid to go home.

The graduate program at the mid-Atlantic institution focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Maia, Oscar, and Scout integrated and practiced foundational knowledge from their course work as Success Coaches during their graduate assistantship. From the experiences shared by Maia, Oscar, and Scout, this learning influenced their professional practice in the choices they have made to work at specific institutions, leave institutions, or work to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work.
Experiencing Imposter Syndrome

Imposter phenomenon or imposter syndrome was defined by Clance and Imes (1978) and referred to successful students who felt like a fraud despite their competence and achievements. According to Parkman (2016), feeling like an imposter is more common when people take on new roles like their first job or confront new challenges. Imposter syndrome was the third theme former Success Coaches mentioned having experienced as they began working in their first professional role or applying for further educational studies. Below, Elizabeth, Tom, Scout, and Brea detailed their feelings as imposters.

Elizabeth had completed internships and spent time working in a clinical setting as part of her graduate work. Despite having experience in her field, Elizabeth talked about the self-doubt she experienced as she entered her professional role:

Switching your role, your identity from a student to the actual professional, I know I tend to suffer from, like, imposter syndrome. So, even though I finished school and I have my provisional license, I still sometimes feel like, oh dude, do I not know what I’m doing? Am I actually good at this?

She got through that negative thinking by reminding herself that she got through six years of school, including graduate school and practicing actual therapy. Elizabeth shared that she knows the information is ingrained in her, so she does not actively think about the therapy process as it comes naturally to her. Even knowing that about herself, she admits, “It’s been a challenge, letting myself trust my gut, and tell myself, you are a professional! You do know what you’re doing! So, that has been an adjustment.”
After graduating with his master’s degree, Tom worked as a tutor and worked on his Ph.D. applications to continue further studies. He also mentioned doubting his abilities as he worked through his Ph.D. application process:

One of the challenges that I’ve been going through personally is imposter syndrome to a certain degree, and realizing that I have gone through the master’s program. But still feeling as though I may not be good enough to apply to the schools that I’m applying to or may not know enough to go into the program.

Tom curbs challenging thoughts by reminding himself of what he has accomplished, of what he has overcome, and to have faith as he navigates through the Ph.D. application process.

In talking about expectations she had about her transition to her new position, Scout said, “I thought I would easily adapt. I wasn’t nervous about whether I will be able to do the job, but I knew that I was probably going to be dealing with like some, you know, imposter syndrome.”

Brea also expressed lacking confidence in her abilities at her work. “I think I expected to grow in my career, maybe I was a little insecure and doubtful of myself.” Brea shared that her work had been received positively and as a result she felt more competent. “I’ve had a lot of opportunities for growth in just the two and a half years I’ve been there, starting as an intern and ending as a senior analyst two years later, so I think that’s a positive.”

Though Elizabeth, Tom, Scout, and Brea lacked confidence in their abilities as they navigated the next steps in their careers, they used skills learned as Success Coaches to move forward. Their tactics included using positive self-talk and anticipating their doubt as they transitioned to new roles in their lives.

_Having Work-Life Balance_
The fourth theme former Success Coaches spoke about was having a work-life balance. As Brea, Potet, and Heba transitioned to their new professional roles, they were confronted with new expectations related to their time. In the section below, each talked about their new reality.

Scout talked about the importance of work-life balance for her which influenced her decision in choosing her first professional role.

Brea spoke about work-life balance in her first two years in the profession and the work expectations set forth by her current supervisor. “I definitely expected a better work-life balance than I have…[there is] expectation to work during evenings or weekends if it’s quote, unquote needed…So I think that was a culture shock to kind of get that.”

Potet mentioned the challenge of balancing the new responsibilities that come with a new position. As part of his position, Potet lives on campus, and he talked about navigating the dynamic that comes with being on campus full-time:

The whole work-life balance piece and living on campus and kind of figuring out how to present myself, you know what I mean? Because I feel like I’m on campus a lot, so even when I’m not on [working] and doing things, it’s like I have to try to keep up this reputation, which I think, I generally do a good job. But I do feel like I lose some [of] myself in the process and try to filter and hold back a lot. So that feels a little strange at times.

Potet has also found that his new position required most of his time, and he has found himself not spending any time with his friends. He elaborated, “I feel like my energy is invested in so many different things that it’s hard to manage, at times, or do them well.” Potet compared the feeling to “being on a balancing line or on a spin in a circus. I’m just like going back and forth, and I’m just very unstable.”
After graduating in May 2020, Scout was offered two positions and chose one. I asked Scout what helped her decide to choose one over the other. She stated the first job was:

Similar to what we were doing [referring to Success Coaching], but I didn’t take it because it just didn’t give me a good vibe. It seemed like everyone was very tired.

Everyone seemed tired and exhausted, so I didn’t get good vibes.

Scout expressed that there were many learning opportunities in the first position, but the position also required wearing multiple hats, which made her doubt that there would be a good work-life balance. Scout noted that everyone stayed in their positions for a long time, but ultimately, she chose the second offer because “everyone was a lot younger who interviewed me, so I felt more connected to them.”

Heba talked about her challenges in transitioning to full-time work and navigating the work-life challenges. Heba articulated that getting adjusted and learning the new system and databases was tough. She admitted, “It was so stressful at one point because I’m like trying to learn everything at once. Trying to grasp everything, trying to figure out, you know, how to advocate for myself when I need help.” Heba has a salary-based position, meaning “there’s not like a clock-in clock-out time.” Heba was aware of self-care but stated, “I found myself working outside of work hours, working on the weekends, filling up documentation. I was like, hold up! You have to revisit this and figure out what’s the schedule that’s going to work for you.”

Success Coaching training included attention to self-care and balancing obligations as important elements for success. The global COVID-19 pandemic amplified the importance of self-care and attention to mental health as the world dealt with the repercussions of this worldwide phenomenon. Judging from the experiences shared by former Success Coaches, the emphasis on balancing the different components of their lives made an impact on them during
the pandemic. It seems to have influenced the new professionals to prioritize creating a good work-life situation for themselves.

**Navigating the System and Bureaucracy of Higher Education Institutions**

Former Success Coaches working in higher education institutions noted challenges they encountered in their professional roles. Scout noted the challenge of navigating the bureaucratic structure as an employee compared to a graduate student. Jacob and Oscar also touched upon the lack of power they had in their roles and the administrative structures that influenced their work experience.

Scout expressed her frustration in navigating the bureaucratic structures in higher education institutions. She expressed challenges in several areas that she has encountered in her current role compared to her experience as a Success Coach and her graduate course work. She contrasted the ability to use data to drive programming. She shared:

> With the assistantship, it was nice when we would see the GPAs [grade point average of students], you’d actually see that they [coached students] would improve. You can actually see how many times they [students] came [for meetings], how many times they cancel[led]. So, [seeing] all that data, you actually feel the satisfaction that you’re doing something. Whereas here, we lack in that part of the data [availability]. We just continue to just do these programs. You don’t really know how effective they are.

Scout also expressed frustration at not having the right constituents at the table to achieve her goals. “We’re trying to develop this living-learning community model. I’m in these meetings, but I’m not in a meeting with anyone in academic affairs or any other department, so you can’t really do what I was hired to do.”
Scout also expressed her discomfort at accumulating achievements. “It’s very political and [I] often feel like I have to treat myself as a brand, which I’m not comfortable with.” Scout also vocalized her discontent about the influence of political forces on higher education overall. She articulated:

I’m starting to see [what] we talked about, capitalism and neoliberalism in higher ed [graduate program]. I’m starting to see a lot of that, and it’s becoming a little bit discouraging because it feels like you’re fighting an entire system.

Lastly, Scout spoke about applying theories to practice in her residence life and academic programming work. Scout relayed that she was hired to apply student development theories to drive her work with students. While her immediate supervisors were supportive of her follow-through, she expressed disappointment that “the people above them are kind of resistant to it.”

Jacob noted that one always has to be ready to adapt to changes in higher education. However, he expressed that this could be frustrating and gave the example of his college restructuring the student services department, which led to an additional advising caseload. He explained that the leadership in charge of the transition was new and acclimating to their roles. Jacob stated, “The system’s transitioning has not been completely smooth or transparent, so the registration period that just ended last week was probably the toughest that I faced.”

Oscar talked about the power structures in higher education and questioned his power as a graduate assistant and in his professional roles since graduating in 2020. He questioned, “Where do we exist in higher ed as GAs [graduate assistants]? Where do you exist as an entry-level person, and when do you start to get that decision-making power?” He acknowledged the differences between the first two institutions where he’s worked:
When I was in [names first institution of employment], I had absolutely none. Here I don't have decision-making power, but I realized I have influence. They’re not going to give me the power to change the environment or anything, but I brought up an issue to the Dean the other day, and she listened. She is like, well, we can’t really budge on this, but we can budge on that.

Oscar felt a slight sense of success and described his thoughts, “I was like, all right well, [I am] learning a little bit more about what it means to be a change agent [and moving] into how to go about doing so.”

The insight provided by Scout, Jacob, and Oscar regarding navigating the systems and bureaucracy of their HE employment offered a window into their transformative learning. They reflected on their Success Coaching roles, coupled with their graduate learning experiences, and compared the experience to their current professional situations. They also compared and contrasted the assumptions and expectations they brought to their positions with the realities of their chosen professional roles. Examining incongruities has provided the former Success Coaches with opportunities to reflect and reframe their conclusions based on their respective work experiences. They continue to use their critical thinking and self-reflection skills as they work through the discrepancies between their expectations and the realities of their professional lives.

**Being the “Youngest” on the Team**

Former Success Coaches who graduated in the last two years found themselves to be younger team members in their respective workplaces. Being the “youngest” on a team comes with its own trials. Former Success Coaches talked about the experiences and expectations for being the newest and “youngest” team members. In this last theme on transformative learning,
Kat and Brea shared their experiences being the “youngest” on their teams and the expectations that brought as new employees.

Kat knew she was the “youngest” person on her team to advise students at a two-year college, and she said being the “youngest” came with an obligation from her coworkers. Kat expressed that when the team wanted input about what college students might be thinking, they turned to her and asked, “You’re like the youngest person here. Can you give us input on what your generation is feeling regarding how classes are being offered?”

Brea also spoke about the expectations of being the “youngest” on her team. She knew she was significantly younger than another recent hire and all of her coworkers. Brea struggled to navigate relationships and power dynamics with a supervisor and more senior coworkers. She wanted them to understand that she was a mature adult and wanted to be spoken to and treated accordingly. Brea expressed her frustration at always being asked to work outside the regular work times. As she was young and unmarried, her coworkers and supervisor assumed she did not have family obligations. Brea said, “You know my time is valuable too. I think there's almost like an expectation that I’m not doing anything. It’s like that age gap causes expectation, whether it’s from leadership or colleagues.”

Brea spoke of a specific situation with her supervisor that led her to create boundaries:

Work on a project was causing a ton of late hours, and it was really hard. I need[ed] a break, and I remember taking a screenshot on my phone because I was on the phone with my boss at almost 4:00 am, still working. I just remember I was crying every day because I just could not learn how to say no.

Over time, Brea found ways to navigate this expectation. She explained:
I definitely think everything we talked about with Success Coaching and accountability, and all of that, like, having to see inside myself and take some ownership of my own interpersonal relationships at work and stand up for myself a bit. I just learned to let things roll off my back a bit [and] push back more on my own time.

A younger team member in a new position may find it challenging to set boundaries. As graduate students are closer in age to undergraduates, Success Coaching training includes setting expectations and creating boundaries in working with undergraduate students. In addition, Success Coaches have the goal of learning ways to empower undergraduate students to find their voice to support their own growth. Brea’s narrative illustrated the transformative learning she experienced from her time as a Success Coach.

**Summary of Findings to Research Question 2.** The narratives shared by former Success Coaches indicate that transformational learning took place as a result of their graduate assistantship. In answering questions about their transition after graduating and entering into their professional roles, former Success Coaches provided examples of challenges they faced and how they navigated their new journey. They described integrating skills they learned from their Success Coaching experience and applying their graduate learning to make meaning of their situations. As a result of the Success Coaching experience, many new professionals approached their personal and professional post-graduation situations differently, with additional skills. Success Coaches experienced a change in their worldview due to their graduate school, Success Coaching, and graduate student experiences.

**Self-Authorship**

The final research question asked how former Success Coaches came to make decisions in their lives. There is potential for paraprofessional graduate students to continue to apply and
practice these new critical thinking and self-reflection skills to make decisions in their early careers as they experience growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives. Some participants shared about making professional decisions, and some spoke about personal decisions. In the first narrative section below, I share narratives from interviews with Kat, Brea, Maia, Oscar, Dawn, Elizabeth, Heba, and Potet about how they navigated making decisions and their confidence level in making these decisions for themselves after graduation. In the final section about self-authorship, I share insights reported by Maia, Brea, and Elizabeth about the significance of their Success Coaching experience in their growth.

Kat reported feeling that she was more confident making decisions in her professional role. “Relying on my own voice has definitely been there more, I think I’ve gained more self-reliance on your thought process. I’ve become more comfortable in how I advise.” To help her navigate big professional decisions, she shared, “I feel like you always have some type of mentor that you go to for those big professional things where you may need like advice on how do I?” Kat stated that she had gained professional confidence. She demonstrated this confidence by applying for new positions after one year of working. “I think for me, understanding how I want to be viewed, I took more ownership of how other people view me. So, I want to get myself out there, but not eliminate opportunities that were coming in.” Kat took time to analyze two positions she considered professionally to determine what she liked and did not like about each position. Though the opportunities came at an impractical time in her life, Kat shared, “I gained knowledge and experience.”

Brea shared that professionally “I’m confident [and] I’m knowledgeable, and I feel comfortable to make my own decisions.” Personally, there was:
still struggle when I talk about myself. I have considered maybe applying to other jobs or 
looking elsewhere. I need to talk to everybody and their mother about what they think I 
should be doing because I struggle to make those decisions.

Maia shared, “I usually try to get some feedback before I make a larger decision on 
something, whether it’s personal or professional.” On deciding to accept a position in the South, 
she shared, “I didn’t make that decision completely on my own, but my parents definitely didn’t 
want me to go, so like I did make most of it.” Maia spoke to the impact of the graduate 
assistantship. “I would say to have the grad assistantship that I had, I don’t think I would have 
had that experience [getting her first position] and moving so far away.” As a result of moving to 
the South to work in her first professional role and moving back to the mid-Atlantic region to 
work in her current role, Maia was confident and independent and stated, “I can move anywhere 
at this point. I’ve gotten to the point where I can do it on my own, I’ve proven that I can do it on 
my own, so I can move anywhere.”

Oscar stated, “I’m pretty solid with making decisions, and I think the biggest thing is I 
know when I need to seek help. I do my research when I need to.” When he does need to get 
advice, Oscar shared that he seeks the opinion of his parents. “I think that they are seasoned. If 
there is a career decision that I’m thinking of, even though they’re not in the industry, I like to 
get their input, just because they’ve been around the block.”

Dawn felt that she was starting to trust herself more when making work-related decisions. 
Specific to her new professional role, she stated, “I trust myself to communicate a little bit more 
clearly than a lot of my team members. I think my strengths with communicating with people are 
where I trust myself the most.” Dawn still looks to others for assistance with detailed work. “I
don’t trust myself; I still look at what other people do, but when it comes to [the] method of talking to students, it’s all me.”

Elizabeth shared that she trusts herself to decide for herself, almost to the point of being stubborn about it with others, especially when it is work-related. Elizabeth stated that, when making decisions, “I can be a little bit stubborn when other people try to tell me that they know my field better than I do, and I feel like I am the one who’s looking at a lot of things.” Elizabeth elaborated:

I tend to trust myself, and that’s why I am so independent in my decision-making. I feel like I’m the one with the most relevant knowledge about the different things, so I still talk to important people in my life about some of the details. I typically make the big decisions on my own and can be a little bit stubborn about it.

Heba also felt confident in her ability to make her own decisions. Heba expressed that she trusts herself. “I also do a lot of research and consultation before making those professional decisions.” Heba shared how she comes to a final decision. “I just like put it all on the table and think to myself, okay well what’s the best fit for me?”

Potet was not as confident in his decision-making process. He felt he is a deep thinker, which hinders his decision-making, but feels he has made progress:

I mean, I’ve always been indecisive generally, and ponder[ing] deeply my decisions before making them, and that’s how it was for a long time. I’d rather not make a decision at all. I think I’ve become more comfortable with collaborating and asking others for input. I think that’s what I do more of like [asking] my parents, friends, supervisor, or another RD [Resident Director]. I do value the opinion of others, and I feel like you can give me a fresh perspective on how to navigate a situation because they may have
encountered something very similar. I would say that I do struggle with making decisions on my own, so I usually resort to speaking with somebody else about it.

Some general observations can be made to assess self-authorship. Interview data showed that former Success Coaches experienced moments of critical reflection to consider differing perspectives. As they moved from a graduate student role to their first and second professional roles and navigated personal life choices, former Success Coaches also progressed in their internal belief system as they developed their identities and relationships with coworkers. Former Success Coaches who have worked in the field longer tended to have more confidence in their decision-making. Those who were older or had a more lived experience tended to be more self-authored.

**Significance of the Success Coaching Experience**

When asked if they wanted to share any additional information, participants offered their thoughts on the significance of their Success Coaching and graduate experience. This final section includes reflections from a few participants who spoke about their graduate student and Success Coaching experience and how it has translated into their lives. Their words were meaningful and moving, so I honor that by including the longer passages below. These narratives from Maia, Brea, and Elizabeth particularly demonstrated transformation and the journey to self-authorship, which is addressed in the final two research questions. The participants addressed how the Success Coaching experience had a personal impact on their worldview, their perspective, and their identity.

Maia shared how she has changed because of her experiences over the last two years from her time to a Success Coach and graduate student to a professional working in higher education:
I am so different from the person that I was when I started that program [referring to Success Coaching and graduate program]. I’m much more confident. I’m much more aware of my surroundings, the people I meet, who I like, how I approach others. My view on life is so different in working in higher ed. You feel like you have some sense of empathy and working in higher ed. I think everybody does, but you also are aware of social issues, much more than I think someone who works in the corporate world. I think personally, I’m just like a completely different person now than I was when I graduated, which is only two years ago, which is scary. I believe that success is different for everyone [and] it looks different on everyone. So, I think I’m finally realizing now that success isn’t always what I thought it was, and just being happy and being surrounded by people that I love and care about is success, you know?

Brea talked about how the Success Coaching experience influenced the way she navigates her interpersonal relationships:

[With] people who learn differently from me, [Success Coaching] definitely helped me gain a lot of confidence there. That was something I had always struggled with, [I had] terrible anxiety. If I had to go for an interview, if I had to do one-on-one stuff with a teacher, it was a lot for me. It helped me completely break those barriers, and it’s so much better just talking to people and feeling more comfortable with people. I think it’s really helped, touched so many aspects of my life, honestly.

Elizabeth talked about the value of the Success Coaching experience in comparison to a different option she had:

The quality of the experience I got here for me was even more valuable than having my name on a research paper would have been if I’d paired with a professor. This gave me
skills, whereas that would have just gotten me some recognition, and frankly, a lot of the skills that I already have to develop in school in class. This [Success Coaching] gave me a different perspective, and I know I’ve touched on it a couple of times. Perspective is just everything when I’m working with patients, I have to be able to look at it from a different perspective, and Success Coaching really taught me how to step outside of my own and look from different angles.

Elizabeth shared that being a Success Coach was not just a job, it was a large part of her identity. Elizabeth explained that when she was helping students, she “was also reinforcing and learning things myself that I bring to all of the different areas of my life. For me, those skills became not so much about the job but about my personal preferences.” She elaborated:

All of the organizational skills in general, I’m very regimented about even small things like how I would make my schedule templates for picking my hours for Success Coaching, and I find I do the same method to track my hours. I absolutely think that I use a lot of critical thinking in my personal and professional life because I like to view all things as a puzzle. Critical thinking allows us to put it all together.

Maia, Brea, and Elizabeth worked in different professions. They used the skills they learned and practiced as Success Coaches and applied them in their lives in various capacities. Their reflections about the influence of the Success Coaching and graduate student experiences were meaningful and showcase the long-term impact and value such experiences can provide.

**Summary of Findings to Research Question 3.** Question 3 sought to explore if coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students and practiced with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship contributed to paraprofessionals’ growth and development. In general, former Success Coaches expressed an
increase in their confidence to make decisions. Some participants talked of their confidence in their personal lives, while others spoke of professional or work-related decisions. Participants reported that they considered differing perspectives in their decision-making. They used critical reflection to make career and personal decisions after graduation, which led to growth. As former Success Coaches started in their first and second professional roles, they had to reflect and make decisions that challenged their belief systems, which influences self-authorship.

**Summary**

The 11 former Success Coaches interviewed for this study found their graduate assistantship valuable. The Success Coaches interviewed came from various majors at the university where these students completed their master’s degrees and worked as Success Coaches. Organization, time management, and learning to create a schedule formed one set of skills. Assessment, decision-making, and interpersonal skills required deeper, critical thinking. As mentioned by various former graduate students, these skills proved to be valuable beyond their time as graduate students as they continued to use these tools both professionally and personally after graduating.

Students reported undergoing transformation as they experienced life as a graduate student, worked as a Success Coach, balanced other internships or work obligations, and managed their personal lives. Success Coaches presented in their own words how the experience transformed them in professional and personal ways.

Former Success Coaches progressed in self-authorship during their graduate school journey. Self-authorship is dependent on individual experiences, so the progress was unique to each participant. In general, former Success Coaches interviewed expressed confidence in their decision-making, some in their personal lives and some in their professional lives. The former
Success Coaches also mentioned they relied on family, mentors, and friends to help them make decisions. In general terms, there was a greater potential for self-authorship the longer a former graduate student had been working after graduation, as they had more opportunities to make decisions that required self-reflection. Other factors were the number of jobs they had and the challenges they faced in their positions, which were stimuli that forced self-reflection and enhanced growth.
Chapter 5

Through this study, I sought to learn about the experiences and insights of graduate students who worked as Success Coaches during their master’s degree programs. The study aimed to determine which coaching skills had a lasting impact as paraprofessional graduate students moved into their post-graduate careers. Additionally, I looked to understand if the former Success Coaches experienced transformational learning in their individual growth and development as they applied these skills professionally and personally after graduation.

It is reasonable to consider that the Success Coaching experience was an asset to graduate students as part of their graduate education because they described many positive aspects of their time in the role. Through the Success Coaching assistantship, graduate students learned and practiced skills which they reported helped them to navigate their post-graduate growth and development. The former Success Coaches also recounted that they utilized this new skillset as they entered their first professional roles. In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this study, connect them to the theoretical framework, briefly mention some limitations of the study, and explore implications for research, policy, and practice.

Summary of Study

This qualitative case study sought to understand the experiences of graduate students who trained and served as Success Coaches as part of a graduate assistantship at a midsized public institution located in the mid-Atlantic region. The following questions guided the study:

1. What knowledge and skills did graduate students develop and practice in their early careers from their Success Coaching graduate assistantship experience?
2. What was the nature of transformational learning that Success Coaches experienced as part of their graduate assistantship during their master’s degree program?
3. How do coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students and practiced with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship contribute to paraprofessionals’ growth and development (self-authorship)?

Study participants offered inside accounts and analysis through our interview conversations. The data that they provided were coded inductively and organized under each of the three research questions.

Former Success Coaches identified professional skills, interpersonal skills, and skills that were personally impactful. The skills identified were helpful to the paraprofessional graduate students as they moved into their first professional roles.

**Table 3**

*Professional and Interpersonal Skills Identified by Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Building self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Learning to trust their ideas and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus resources</td>
<td>Working with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional bureaucracy</td>
<td>Building interactive skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In answering the first research question, participants reported that the skills listed in Table 4 were useful in their personal and professional lives after graduation. Former Success Coaches applied time management skills to structure their days and utilize even small amounts of time wisely. Some former Success Coaches were able to translate the skills from the university setting to clinical settings. Through the Success Coaching experiences, participants felt they were able to practice interactive skills through their work with undergraduate students. Former
Success Coaches expressed that the work with undergraduates helped them build their self-confidence and contributed to trusting their own ideas and opinions, which helped in their transition to their respective work environments.

Participants also noted that some skills or practices they developed in their work with undergraduate students made a personal impact on their thought processes. During Success Coaching work, participants had to be able to listen, ask the right questions, gain trust, assess student needs, and figure out strategies to work with the student to meet their goals. This work required high-level cognitive skills. Success Coaching required combining these skills, all while keeping in mind factors of undergraduate student development, individual student backgrounds, and personal challenges that individual student may have been facing. Using learned skills to work through these scenarios impacted former Success Coaches’ thought processes in how they approached their work, philosophy, and employment options post-graduation.

Participants described their challenges with undergraduate students during their Success Coaching time and how they handled the situations at that time. They offered alternative methods which integrated new skills they learned and applied in their subsequent time as Success Coaches that they would use if faced with the same type of student challenge now. Former Success Coaches also identified challenges which included coaching challenging students, the emotional labor of Success Coaching, personal connections common with students, and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through their experiences navigating the challenging situations during their time as Success Coaches, their adjustment to the employee role in their respective work fields after graduation, and adapting to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, participants began their transformational journey.
The second research question was addressed as former Success Coaches compared their Success Coaching and graduate experiences to their first job roles and satisfaction. They offered insight into their decision-making processes when accepting and changing positions. They shed light on using the Success Coaching center, supervision, and organization as the model by which they gauged their own professional workspace. Interview participants also recounted how they applied skills they learned to create boundaries when faced with work-life balance issues and differing expectations due to being the “youngest” employee in their professional role.

Transformational learning was evidenced as participants described how they worked through their challenges using skills learned in their graduate assistantship and their graduate education. Former Success Coaches described how they integrated diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in their first professional roles and made career choices as they felt being change agents was meaningful in their work. Finally, transformational learning was suggested as former graduate students spoke about working through feelings of imposter syndrome and learning to function in their roles in the bureaucratic system of higher education.

Lastly, the final research question was addressed when former Success Coaches described post-graduation growth and development as indicated by narratives about their decision-making process that integrated past experiences and new skills and learning acquired through their graduate school experience, which included the Success Coaching graduate assistantship. Many participants expressed confidence in their ability to make decisions related to their job setting. While participants expressed that they consulted with mentors, friends, or family members in making personal and professional decisions, they articulated an increase in their abilities to make standalone personal and professional decisions in their post-graduate lives. Participants spoke about making choices in accepting their first jobs in which they considered
moving away from their home, the changing situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the types of positions that were available. Due to the pandemic, participants recounted their choice to rethink decisions and make changes because things did not work out as planned. Participant descriptions of how they came to make complex decisions included self-reflection and critical thinking, suggesting personal growth.

**Application of Theoretical Framework to Findings**

I used Baxter Magolda’s (2001) self-authorship theory and Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory to gain a greater understanding of the post-graduate experience of participants who worked as Success Coaches in a graduate assistantship during their graduate studies. As part of their work as Success Coaches, they received training on coaching students based on the Learning Partnership Model (LPM) (Baxter Magolda, 2004a). The LPM integrates self-authorship theory into practice. The objective for a Success Coaching partnership with undergraduate students was to engage them in critical thinking and self-reflection. As the Success Coaches engaged with undergraduates using the LPM, the SCC engaged in a learning partnership with the Success Coaches as they were also students who encountered difficulties that could bring their own beliefs into question. As former Success Coaches practiced these skills in their graduate assistantship experience, they had the opportunity to reflect and reexamine beliefs and consider different perspectives. Through the participant interviews, I looked to discover if former graduate students continued to apply their new skills into their early careers and in their growth and development in their post-graduation lives.

Participants demonstrated they acquired skills and knowledge through their learning partnership work with undergraduate students in their Success Coaching assistantship. Through the narratives provided, they described how they applied the skills they gained from their
Success Coaching experience to their professional practice and personal lives. They provided narratives of challenging situations they encountered during their Success Coaching experience and how they would handle things differently in present day, as they had time to reflect on their initial encounters and would integrate new learning into their methodology. They also shared they were more confident in their decision-making process. Through narratives on how they came to make decisions about choosing one job offer over another or to leave a job situation that did not correspond with their internal belief system, participants offered insight into their use of critical thinking skills and self-reflection.

Former Success Coaches demonstrated transformational learning in several ways. They described applying communication and time management skills to their coaching work as well as making referrals and helping students navigate the bureaucracy of institutions. Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory helps to understand how adults make meaning in their lives. This process involves critical reflection of one’s beliefs and the ability to reassess old assumptions and revise those beliefs to direct future decisions (Irby et al., 2013). Former Success Coaches demonstrated the transformative learning they underwent through several themes that emerged from participant interviews. These involved coaching challenging students, the emotional labor of serving in student support roles, comparing job role and satisfaction, and being a change agent with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Baxter Magolda (2007) and Mezirow (2000) spoke to the importance of learning to “negotiate and act on our purposes, values, feelings and meaning rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69; Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Participants employed self-reflection and critical thinking, and based on their own experiences, they applied this new learning as they described managing feelings of imposter syndrome, creating a work-life balance, and navigating the bureaucracy of
higher education institutions. Lastly, former Success Coaches indicated they experienced growth in their development from their interactive work with undergraduate students. This work helped them build interpersonal skills which contributed to increased self-confidence and trusting their own ideas and opinions.

**Discussion**

In this section, I discuss the implications for this study’s findings and the contributions to several research areas in higher education. First, I present the study’s value in understanding the Success Coaching role through the experience of the coach in the coach–coachee dynamic. Then I address the experience of graduate students in student affairs related graduate assistantships in higher education institutions. Lastly, I speak to the value of the Success Coaching assistantship to graduate students in other master’s degree programs.

As a newer practice to support students in higher education, studies about Academic Success Coaching have focused on retention and successful outcomes for undergraduate students participating in coaching (Robinson, 2015). As presented in Chapter 2, there are gaps in the literature about the academic Success Coaching experience from the coach’s perspective (Nghia & Duyen, 2019). Through the narrative stories, former graduate students shed light on the coach–coachee experience from the coaches’ perspective. Warren (2019) conducted a qualitative study which focused on the experiences of graduate students working as academic coaches. The study concluded that while the coaches’ experiences were positive overall, “being an academic coach means being involved in an ongoing power struggle between limited power, powerful relationships, and empowering preparation for the future” (Warren, 2019, pp. 193-194).

This study offers another lens into the experience of graduate students who worked as Success Coaches. Former Success Coaches identified valuable skills they developed through
their Success Coaching experience and described how practicing those skills with undergraduate students helped them in their professional practice as well as their personal lives. Other responsibilities, such as managing a caseload of students and coordinating one-on-one meetings, were also identified as beneficial to building interpersonal skills. In addition, the study offers examples of transformational learning that participants experienced as they moved into their post-graduate lives.

The Learning Partnership Model (2004a) validates learner’s knowledge based on their experiences and allows the coach and coachee to mutually construct meaning. The LPM can engage students in critical thinking and self-reflection, which influences self-authorship. In training and supervising graduate students, engaging them in dialogue through regular check-ins about their graduate student experience, which includes their work, personal and graduate school experiences encourages critical thinking and self-reflection to question their own thoughts and opinions. The different components of the LMP encourage critical thinking and self-reflection.

According to White and Nonamaker (2011), master’s programs in student affairs often include graduate assistantships in various roles to support students on college campuses. The Success Coaching position falls in the academic category of such positions. Research in the student affairs area has focused on graduate preparation programs as well as entry-level, mid-level, senior administrator, and faculty perceptions, but it has not addressed graduate students engaged in assistantship positions (Burkard et al., 2005; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Many graduate assistantship roles in HE involve work which directly impacts undergraduate student outcomes. While it is not a comprehensive study on the many challenges that graduate students encounter in their graduate school experience, this study contributes to understanding the value of one type of graduate assistantship in an academic support role.
As part of the narrative data, former graduate students shared how they navigated their responsibilities as graduate students and Success Coaches and in additional internships and their personal lives. In addition, the study offers an understanding into the graduate experience, including specific data on skills developed in a graduate assistantship and the challenges of the graduate assistant experience. Through this understanding there is opportunity for graduate school administrators, faculty, and departments who work with graduate students to inform their practices and policies to support graduate students.

According to Kinser (1993), new student affairs professionals expressed a disconnect between what they learned in their graduate school curriculum and their first job. Graduate students have reported lack of training, preparation, and orientation upon entering assistantships (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008, Skorobohacz, 2013). This study offers additional narratives that can inform and support graduate student needs to help them gain professional skills (communication, time management, learning about campus resources, and navigating institutional bureaucracy) and interpersonal skills (building self-confidence, learning to trust their own ideas and opinions, working with others, and building interactive skills). As mentioned by various former Success Coaches, these skills proved to be valuable beyond their time as graduate students; they continued to use these tools both professionally and personally after graduating.

Former Success Coaches shared that the skills they acquired during their graduate assistantship helped them succeed in their respective professional roles. Former master’s degree students in speech language pathology, industrial organizational psychology and clinical and mental health counseling, expressed that they learned to consider diverse perspectives, engage with others, build rapport, assess needs, and build critical thinking and emotional intelligence
skills as they worked through challenging situations. These skills have also helped former Success Coaches transition into their respective professional employment areas. In addition, former Success Coaches continue to practice these skills when making decisions in their personal and professional lives. In the next section, I talk about the limitations of this study.

Limitations of the Study

In this section, I outline the limitations of this study, including limitations in analysis and generalization. Overall, it is difficult to generalize this study as it is bound to a specific case and participants who served as Success Coaches in a graduate assistantship. In addition, the particular academic program, training, and setting are exclusive to this study, making it difficult to apply the outcomes to other Success Coaching centers. Study participants were unique to the study and their experience took place at a particular place in time. As a qualitative study, the participants and researcher are part of the study data, each bringing their perspectives, biases, and lived experience into the research study. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the data collection and changed the experience of the participants in the study. I did not anticipate the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the participants’ mental health related to additional pressures of virtual Success Coaching, as well as their post-graduate experiences associated with their job searches and the time in their first professional positions, so it is possible that my interpretation of the conclusions may be skewed.

Limitations in Analysis

I used inductive coding to allow for participant voices to emerge through the data (Miles et al., 2014). As the researcher, I bring my own biases, positionality, and worldview which can influence the thematic analysis and data interpretation. However, I also had intimate knowledge of the case and a close relationship to the subjects since I supervised them and mentored them;
because of this, the data obtained is rich in context and content. There was trust between the study participants and me, which can lead to openness and more depth to the data.

*Limitations in Generalization*

This study was specific to a particular institution located outside a major metropolitan city in the mid-Atlantic region. The study was specific to a coaching center with its own training specific to the institution. The Success Coaches interviewed had differing training and work experiences depending on the number of semesters they worked. The COVID-19 pandemic also dictated the training and work environment individual Success Coaches experienced. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), it is hard to achieve the same results in qualitative research involving human subjects as their behavior is individualistic. In general, case study research results are applicable to the phenomenon being studied and therefore hard to generalize (Mills et al., 2009). While generalizability is not a characteristic of a qualitative study, this study offers a lens into the Success Coaching experience, which can inform Success Coaching center practices at other institutions.

*Implications*

The graduate student role is complex. Many factors influence the graduate student experience, including their graduate program requirements, the higher education institutional policies, graduate assistantships, and their personal life circumstances. In this specific study, the Success Coaching program, their Success Coaching supervisor, and the students they served influenced participants’ experiences. The impact of these collective factors continued into the graduate students’ post-graduate lives. In the next section, I speak to the implications for future educational research, practice, and policy that emerged from the study findings.

*Implications of Future Educational Research*
There are important implications for research, policy, and practice based on this study. In terms of research, it would be interesting to study the LPM’s impact on the Success Coaches during the time they are in the role and still engaged in their master’s program to understand the development of self-authorship during the graduate assistantship. To understand the longer-term impact of transformational learning and self-authorship, there is value in research to follow the graduate students in a longitudinal study 2-5 years into their professional roles. This would allow for a deeper understanding of how long the Success Coaching role impacts the former graduate student journey. There is a high attrition rate of professionals entering careers in higher education. This study offered a bridge to students’ insights in moving from an assistantship experience into their first professional experiences. Continuing to learn and gain further insight into their journey can inform practice and policy for higher education graduate departments.

**Practice**

Related to Success Coaching practices and developing graduate students’ skills, there is more opportunity to empower graduate students to practice decision-making skills while providing support in their Success Coaching role. Participants offered rich descriptions of the impact of working with specific student challenges and how they navigated their strategies for assistance. These narratives make it clear that allowing graduate students to work through complex situations requiring them to practice decision-making contributes to self-reflection and self-authorship. In general, there is value for all departments where graduate students work to look for opportunities that allow graduate students to practice complex problem-solving skills requiring critical thinking, decision-making, and self-reflection.

There is room for Student Affairs to more clearly expose the bureaucratic structures of an institution to allow students to gain an understanding of institutional dynamics and cultures and
create dialogue of workplace realities. A start may be to acknowledge the existence of the administrative structures that guide the Success Coaching center. Sharing some internal knowledge about the back end of bureaucratic structures and talking about the accompanying challenges may offer graduate students some insight into the reality of future work environments.

**Policy**

The Success Coaching graduate assistantship provides an opportunity for graduate students from all master’s programs to work as Success Coaches. There is value for all master’s degree programs in higher education institutions to consider including an experiential learning component. Ideally, such a program would include a leadership/mentoring element that would challenge graduate students to think critically and allow them to practice problem-solving. Additional elements of orientation and training should be considered as well. While this study did not provide in-depth information about Success Coaching training, all Success Coaches underwent a mandatory, 10-hour training prior to their work with undergraduate students. The training provided graduate students a baseline of skills and an orientation on record management, communication, and professional expectations. As a few participants mentioned receiving no training prior to starting in their professional role, participating in an orientation or training can provide a baseline for future professionals to ask employers about expectations as they start in their professional roles. The findings from this study can inform Success Coaching centers, graduate programs that offer graduate assistantships, master’s level graduate programs, and departments that train entry-level higher education professionals.

**Summary**

Overall, students who participated in the Success Coaching graduate assistantship gained professional and personal skills. Graduate students came into their Success Coaching experience
with similar challenges as undergraduates in terms of their own anxieties, strengths, and weaknesses in skill sets. Graduate students faced similar struggles to undergraduates with respect to navigating the many challenges that accompany graduate level studies. Through the Success Coaching assistantship, former graduate students made personal gains in their own development by practicing skills with undergraduate students. Practicing interpersonal skills with undergraduates improved their own confidence, which helped them as they transitioned into the workforce. As employees, some participants indicated they were able to have better professional relationships and communication with their coworkers. In addition, the skills learned helped them to be better organized and better manage their time in the professional work arena.

Lastly, having to make decisions for themselves in their work with undergraduate students contributed to former graduate students’ transformational learning and, more so, self-authorship. They improved their critical thinking and self-reflection as they worked with undergraduate students facing challenges. Helping students solve challenges and assessing outcomes required them to use the full complement of their skills and apply the knowledge when confronted with similar, subsequent student situations. In terms of personal development, when former graduate students made decisions for themselves in their work with undergraduates, it translated into their gaining confidence in their decision-making abilities, which led to their transformational learning and self-authorship.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

TO: Former Graduate students who worked as a Success Coach at West Chester University in the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years

FROM: Rita Patel Eng, Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University

RE: Participation in Dissertation Research Study

Hello (Student First Name),

I hope this email finds you well and safe. I am currently a doctoral student in the EdD Program at West Chester University. I am getting in touch to ask for your participation in a research study for my dissertation. My dissertation study seeks to understand if the coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students (and implemented with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship) at a midsized public institution, have long-term impacts on these selfsame early professionals in their early careers and in terms of their growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives.

I am writing to ask for your participation in a semi-structured, individual interview (60-90 minutes in duration) and/or a focus group discussion (1.5 to 2 hours in duration). The individual interviews will occur November to December via Zoom. The focus group discussion will occur in November to December via Zoom. If chosen to participate in the focus group discussion, I will send a group email to the focus group participants, and we would choose a mutual time to schedule the focus group discussion. An additional 10 minutes of your time would be required to complete a Consent Form and Demographic information through a Qualtrics survey link. Participants for the study must meet the criteria outlined below.

To be considered for this research, you must meet the following criteria:

1. You are 18 years of age or older.
2. You completed a ten-hour training for coaching undergraduate students in Fall 2019 and/or Fall 2020.
3. You completed a graduate assistantship as a Success Coach at West Chester University during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years.
4. You graduated from a master’s degree program at West Chester University by Summer 2021.
5. You are currently employed, completing hours required for certification in your field of practice, or pursuing further studies for the Fall 2021 semester.
6. You complete the Informed Consent form through Qualtrics.

Please review and complete this Eligibility and Consent form and if you have any questions regarding the study, participation, the consent form, or anything that is unclear, please email me
at rpateleng@wcupa.edu. This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol: IRB00005030.

I am eager to talk to you and looking to try and conduct a minimum of 8-10 interviews. Thank you for your time and consideration regarding my research and I look forward to hearing back from you soon!
Appendix B: Participant Eligibility, Consent, and Questionnaire

Participant Eligibility, Consent, and Questionnaire (administered through Qualtrics)

Eligibility Requirement
In order to participate for this research, you must meet the following criteria. If you can answer YES to ALL questions below, please complete the Consent Form and Questionnaire:
1. You are 18 years of age or older.
2. You completed a ten-hour training for coaching undergraduate students in Fall 2019 or Fall 2020.
3. You completed a graduate assistantship as a Success Coach at West Chester University during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years.
4. You graduated from a master’s degree program at West Chester University by Summer 2021.
5. You are currently employed, completing hours required for certification in your field of practice, or pursuing further studies for the Fall 2021 semester.
6. You are willing to participate in a semi-structured, individual interview (60-90 minutes in duration) and/or a focus group discussion (1.5 to 2 hours in duration).

Consent Form
Project Title: Success Coaching: A Case Study Examining Skill Development and Self-Authorship

Investigator(s): Rita Patel Eng; Orkideh Mohajeri

Project Overview:
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Rita Patel Eng as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this study is to understand if the coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students (and implemented with undergraduate students as part of a Success Coaching assistantship) at a midsized public institution, have long-term impacts on these selfsame early professionals in their early careers and in terms of their growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives. This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol IRB00005030.

You may ask Rita Patel Eng any questions to help you understand this study. If you do not want to be a part of this study, it will not affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - The purpose of this study is to understand if the coaching skills developed by paraprofessional graduate students (and implemented with undergraduate students as part...
of a Success Coaching assistantship) at a midsized public institution, have long-term
impacts on these selfsame early professionals in their early careers and in terms of their
growth and development (self-authorship) in their post-graduation lives.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete Eligibility/Criteria requirement and Questionnaire. (10 minutes), and
   - Participate in an Individual Interview (60-90 minutes), and/or
   - Participate in a Focus Group Discussion (1.5 to 2 hours).
   - This study can take up to 70-130 total minutes of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - Depending on your experience, you may experience some emotional discomfort
     in recounting your assistantship as a Success Coach.
   - If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Rita
     Patel Eng.
   - If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - There is no direct benefits to you. There is no financial compensation for your
     participation.
   - Nevertheless, positive reflection about the graduate experience, skills learned and
     applied, professionally and personally has potential to help you increase your self-
     confidence.
   - You will be able to give meaningful feedback to the researcher to help create
     more meaningful professional experiences that provide growth opportunities for
     future graduate students.
   - Your feedback will help other campus departments and graduate school
     administration to create more meaningful experiences for future graduate
     students.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - The session will be video and audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom.
   - Your records will be private. Only Rita Patel Eng, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (Faculty
     Advisor), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will **not** be used in any reports; you will have a chance to select a
     pseudonym for yourself.
   - Records will be stored:
     - Password Protected File/Computer as well as login in/password protected
       access to files stored on a secured cloud storage.
     - Laptop will be stored at 15 Southwind Lane, Downingtown, PA 19335 or
       alternatively at room 221 in Lawrence Hall at WCU at 706 S New Street,
       West Chester, PA 19383.
• All records will be anonymized. All identifiable data will be removed and given identifiers known only to Rita Patel Eng and Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri.
• Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   • No

8. **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
   • For any questions with this study, contact:
     o **Primary Investigator:** Rita Patel Eng at 610-299-0095 or rpateleng@wcupa.edu
     o **Faculty Sponsor:** Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or omohajeri@wcupa.edu

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   • Participant’s de-identified data may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or the legally authorized representative.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

My consent is being sought for a research study. I understand my participation is voluntary and I am under no obligation to participate. The time expected for my participation is approximately one to two hours over the course of two months. The researcher is asking me to complete Eligibility/Criteria requirement, a questionnaire and participate in an individual, one-on-one interview **AND/OR** a focus group interview (via Zoom).

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

_________________________________
Subject/Participant Signature   Date:_______________

_________________________________
Witness Signature             Date:_______________

☐ I have read the eligibility required to participate in this research and can answer yes to all the questions listed.

☐ I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know
all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

☐ For the purpose of study anonymity, I choose the following pseudonym for myself (Type in a first name of your choosing):

Q2 Participant Signature:

Q3 Enter your First Name:

Q4 Enter your Last Name:

Q5 Please provide your preferred contact email:
Q6 What is your gender?

- Male (including transgender men)
- Female (including transgender women)
- Non-binary
- Gender Identity Not Listed
- Prefer Not to Say

Q7 What is your race/ethnicity? Please select all that apply.

- White
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Mixed or Multiracial
- Prefer not to say
Q8 When did you work as a Success Coach in the LARC? Check all that apply.

☐ Fall 2018
☐ Spring 2019
☐ Fall 2019
☐ Spring 2020
☐ Fall 2020
☐ Spring 2021

Q9 Please indicate the Fall semester training you attended for Success Coaching. Check all that apply.

☐ Fall 2018
☐ Fall 2019
☐ Fall 2020
Q10 When did you graduate from West Chester University?

- Winter 2020
- Spring 2020
- Summer 2020
- Winter 2021
- Spring 2021
- Summer 2021

Q11 Which master's degree program/major did you graduate from?

____________________________________________________________________

Q12 Are you currently employed in the intended profession for your earned master's degree?

- Yes ________________________________________________
- No ________________________________________________
Q13 How many years have you been working, post-graduation from your master's degree program?

☐ One year or less

☐ Two years or less

☐ I am completing required hours for licensing in my field.

☐ I am pursuing further studies. ____________________________

☐ Other ____________________________

Q14 Are you willing to participate in a focus group discussion with other former Success Coaches?

☐ Yes

☐ No

End of Block: Default Question Block
Appendix C: Individual Interview Question Protocol

Individual Interview Question Protocol

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where are you from? What did you study in undergrad and in grad school, and why?

2. How did you secure your Graduate Assistantship in Success Coaching? What was the process?
   **Probe:**
   - Why did you decide to apply for an assistantship as a Success Coach?
   - Did you consider other assistantships on campus?
   - How did this one win out? Why did this appeal more to you?

3. What are you currently doing professionally and how long have you been in the position?

4. Can you list some of the skills you learned or feel you developed through your Success Coaching experience that have been helpful in your current professional role?

5. Can you recall a really challenging time that you faced as a Success Coach graduate assistant? Tell me a story about it and how you handled it.
   **Probe:**
   - Perhaps it was juggling classes, working as a coach, and managing your private life…e.g. managing time and staying organized.
   - Working with students and a challenging situation.
   - Learning about all the campus resources.
   **Follow up:** If you were to be faced with the situation again, would you handle things differently? How?

6. Do you think your Success Coaching graduate assistantship influences your work in your current professional role? Can you give an example?

7. How did you navigate making decisions regarding your career path after graduate school?
   **Probe:**
   - What factors influenced you in accepting your first position? Current position? (Did they decide themselves, were external factors considered?)

8. I would like to know how the reality of your professional experience compares to your expectations. What were your expectations for your first or current position? How did the experience meet your expectations?
   **Probe:**
• What did you expect [or hope] the environment to be like?
• What did you expect would go well for you and what would be challenging (in your position and adapting to the life outside of college)?
• What kind of relationships did you expect [or hope] to build with other colleagues? With new people in a new city?
• How did you expect [or hope] you would grow or change in the transition?
• Did you use your past assistantship experiences/environment as a base to compare your current situation?

Follow up: If expectations were not met, ask: How did you resolve not meeting your expectations with the position?

9. Can you tell me about some of the challenges you encountered in your transition to full-time work and navigating other life challenges over the last year/two years? How did you meet those challenges? What types of things did you do to help yourself overcome the challenges?

10. Tell me about your best/worst experience in your current full-time professional role. Were you able to use your experience as a Success Coach to help you navigate through your worst experience?

Probe:
• Describe the experience.
• Why was it important?
• How did you make sense of the experience?
• How did it affect/influence you?

11. How confident are you making (professional or personal) decisions for yourself? Do you tend to rely on the input of others, or do you trust yourself to make the most appropriate decision?

12. Tell me about connections you see among your experiences. Has your graduate internship as a Success Coach influenced your decisions and actions? How have the experiences you have shared during the interview influenced who you are today?

13. Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to add about your experience as a Success Coach and how it impacted your current professional position, your professional or personal growth?
Appendix D: IRB Approval

Jul 27, 2021 10:54:42 AM EDT

To: Rita Patel Eng
Educational Found. & Policy St, University College


Dear Rita Patel Eng:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Success Coaching: A Case Study Examining Skill Development and Self-Authorship.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155