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Investigating Transformation: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Investigating Transformation:

An Exploratory Study of Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

by

Christina M. Partin

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Interdisciplinary Education
College of Education
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to all of the graduate teaching assistants who have inspired my own teaching and professional work. Your creativity, passion, and dedication to your work have energized and motivated me every day. I thank you for allowing me to be part of your journey, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for being part of mine.

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .................................................................................i  
List of Tables ................................................................................iv  
List of Figures ................................................................................v  

Abstract ..........................................................................................vi  

Chapter 1: Introduction to Study .......................................................1  
  Background ..................................................................................1  
  Outcomes of Graduate School Experiences: Significance of this Study ....5  
  Purpose of the Study and Research Questions ................................7  
  Limitations ................................................................................10  
  Summary ...................................................................................12  
  Organization of Remaining Chapters .........................................12  
  Definition of Terms ....................................................................14  

Chapter 2: Review of Existing Literature ........................................16  
  Introduction ...............................................................................16  
  Changing Landscape of Higher Education ..................................17  
  Graduate Teaching Assistants ....................................................20  
    Socialization ..........................................................................20  
    Identity Formation ...................................................................22  
    Unique Attributes of Graduate Teaching Assistants .................23  
  Disorienting Dilemmas ..............................................................24  
  Transformative Learning Experiences ........................................26  
  The Role of Structural and Social Support ................................28  
  The Role of the Mentor .............................................................31  
  Summary ...................................................................................34  

Chapter 3: Research Methods ..........................................................36  
  Introduction ...............................................................................36  
  Research Design ........................................................................37  
  Theoretical Framework .............................................................39  
  Qualitative Techniques .............................................................40  
  Participant Selection ...................................................................41  
  In-Depth Interviews ....................................................................45
Chapter 4: Findings .......................................................................................................................... 56
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 56
Challenges Associated with Describing the Sample ........................................................................ 57
Overview of the Sample ..................................................................................................................... 58
   Institutional Context ....................................................................................................................... 58
   Length of Service ............................................................................................................................ 59
   Diversity ....................................................................................................................................... 59
   Roles Represented .......................................................................................................................... 60
Profiles of the Participants Who Informed this Study ..................................................................... 62
   Stan .............................................................................................................................................. 62
   Jordan .......................................................................................................................................... 62
   Brooklyn ...................................................................................................................................... 63
   Dylan ............................................................................................................................................ 63
   Maxima ....................................................................................................................................... 64
   Jenna ............................................................................................................................................ 64
   Sterling ....................................................................................................................................... 65
   Sanjay .......................................................................................................................................... 66
Findings that Emerged from the Data ............................................................................................... 67
Theme #1: GTA Perceptions of the Value of Their Role .................................................................... 68
   Participants’ Perceptions of the Importance of the GTA Role ....................................................... 68
   Workload and Compensation ........................................................................................................ 71
   Summary of Theme #1 ................................................................................................................... 74
Theme #2: Navigating Institutional Context- Hierarchies, Obstacles, and Support ...................... 75
   Perceived Hierarchies and Microaggressions ............................................................................... 75
   Urban Legends ............................................................................................................................... 79
   Departmental Culture .................................................................................................................... 82
   Institutional Culture and Perceived Misuse of Power .................................................................. 85
   Summary of Theme #2 ................................................................................................................... 96
Theme #3: Disorienting Dilemmas, Mediating Factors, and Identity Development ...................... 97
   Alienation .................................................................................................................................... 97
   The Impact of Social Location and Positionality ........................................................................ 100
   The GTA Role and Career Preparation ....................................................................................... 104
   The Role of Peer, Social, and Institutional Support .................................................................... 108
   The Role of the Mentor ................................................................................................................ 113
   Summary of Theme #3 ................................................................................................................ 116
Summary .......................................................................................................................................... 117
List of Tables

Table 1: Constructivist Framework and Applications to Present Study ........................................ 40
Table 2: Participant Demographics ............................................................................................. 60
Table 3: Participant Experiences ................................................................................................. 61
Table 4: Participant Profiles ........................................................................................................ 67
Table 5: Themes and Their Insights Into Research Questions ..................................................... 124
List of Figures

Figure 1: GradSolidarity Social Media Post................................................................. 86
Figure 2: GradSolidarity Social Media Post.................................................................. 87
Figure 3: GradSolidarity Social Media Post.................................................................. 87
Figure 4: GradSolidarity Social Media Post.................................................................. 89
Figure 5: GradSolidarity Social Media Post.................................................................. 90
Figure 6: GradSolidarity Social Media Post.................................................................. 93
Figure 7: Transformative Learning Experience as a Linear and Internal Process................................................................. 155
Figure 8: Differential Outcomes of Disorienting Dilemmas and the Role Intervention Plays in the Transformative Learning Experience ........................................... 156
Abstract

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are becoming increasingly responsible for undergraduate instruction in the landscape of higher education. These experiences may serve as a pipeline for career readiness and success in faculty positions. Yet, the experiences of graduate teaching assistants are largely unexplored. This study describes the perceptions and experiences of a selected sample of GTAs, including their perceptions of available support, and the role of that support in navigating potential disorienting dilemmas.

Existing literature suggests that disorienting dilemmas lead to transformative experiences through an internal process of critical self-reflection, but neglects the possibility of differential outcomes to disorienting dilemmas. Further, existing literature suggests that such challenges simply create a common, linear path toward transformation. Using qualitative data collected through participant interviews, this study offers an in-depth exploration of GTA experiences, while establishing ways in which these meet the criteria set forth in the literature for “disorienting dilemmas.” Futhers, this study examines ways that such experiences are mediated by GTA social and institutional support systems. By investigating the experiences of graduate teaching assistants, this study addresses a gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of the GTAs about their experiences in their role. Further, this study challenges an assumption in the literature about transformative experiences and offers insights into the differential outcomes may arise as a result of a disorienting dilemma.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

The cost of attending college in the United States has steadily increased for students across all types of institutions of higher education (public, private, two-year, four-year, etc.). While it might be reasonable to expect the cost of college to rise along with the average rate of inflation, Ehrenberg and Rizzo (2004) reported that “undergraduate tuition and fees in the United States have increased by an average of 2.5 to 3.5 percentage points above the inflation rate” (p. 29). One explanation for the increase in the rising cost of going to college is that increasing tuition costs helps fill a deficit created by funding that was once provided by other sources.

Academia is currently operating in an era of disinvestment by state and federal governments as funding is cut from operating budgets (Quinterno, 2012). This disinvestment comes at a time when, according to Ehrenberg and Rizzo (2004) colleges and universities have faced an increase in real costs and expenses, including “the rising costs of technology, student services, and institutional financial aid; the unrelenting competition to be the best in every dimension of an institution's activities; and, at the research universities, the increasing institutional costs of scientific research” (p. 29). In these institutions that place high value on research, such as R1, R2, and R3 doctoral universities (defined by the Carnegie Classification of
Institutions of Higher Education as institutions that award at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees per year), graduate student costs must also be taken into consideration.

When state and federal coffers are strained and less money is invested into higher education, advocates of tuition increase believe that a greater investment by students (who will ultimately reap the benefit of higher salaries due to their education) is the ideal way to fill the void. While this thinking may seem logical for degree programs that lead to professional or trade careers, the model is likely to deter students from entering high-demand fields that may offer lower salaries, such as social work or K-12 education. Further, this model fails to account for graduate tuition. According to Ehrenberg (2005) “most doctoral students at major American universities are supported by their institutions on fellowships, research assistantships, and teaching assistantships, all of which typically provide for tuition remission” (p. 11). Since these funds often come from budget appropriation from the state or from federal grants, an increase in graduate student tuition would largely impact the researchers whose grants support these stipends or the institutional net revenue. Ehrenberg suggests that “absent raising tuition for undergraduate still further to subsidize the cost of doctoral education” (p.20), further cuts in higher education simply lead to less funding opportunities for graduate students.

Educators and mid-level administrators are often told to “do more with less” and institutions are forced to cut resources, and in worst cases, make reductions in staff and permanent faculty (Barrow, 1996). Colleges and universities are forced to look for innovative ways to reduce cost while still offering uninterrupted service to undergraduate students. Ehrenberg (2005) notes that “most state support for research that public universities receive takes the form of lower teaching loads for faculty to allow them more time for research” (p. 12)
and as budgets are cut, less state support for research may be “translated into higher teaching loads for faculty (and fewer faculty)” (p. 12). Having graduate teaching assistants serve as an instructor to undergraduate classes offers one way to plug that gap. As more and more undergraduate alumni seek admission into graduate school, colleges and universities are presented with a pool of individuals who, for a low rate of pay (Quinterno, 2012), are able and credentialed to offset faculty teaching loads and cost of instruction. Understanding that the undergraduate student population of higher education institutions has expanded and increased substantially, it is not surprising that the use of graduate teaching assistants has increased as well. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and opportunities that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) encounter in that role, and to describe their perceptions of those experiences. Exploring the GTAs’ perceptions of their experiences will situate this study in the broader academic conversation about transformative learning and will provide insights into what kinds of supports GTAs perceive as available or important as they navigate their experiences in that role.

Graduate teaching assistants are usually students seeking Master’s or Doctoral level degrees, whose tuition is funded in part or whole through their employment at their institution in this role. More and more, these graduate teaching assistants are becoming a large workforce in higher education as they are embarking on the first part of their journey into academia. They are generally inexperienced in professional life and are still learning to navigate the academy as students themselves, yet they are often expected to immediately assume a professional identity. Despite this gap in experience and credentials, especially in settings like large universities, graduate teaching assistants are often handed the responsibility of providing
instruction to undergraduate students. Some are charged as the sole instructor of a course, while others may be in charge of a lab or breakout session, or a graduate assistant may assist a faculty member with various tasks related to instruction such as grading, or with the instruction itself. In many instances, graduate assistants are often the first point of contact for an undergraduate student, and the graduate assistant may even act as a buffer between the student and the faculty member (Allen & Rueter, 1990).

For graduate teaching assistants, working in this new role can create a time of great excitement, or a time of great difficulty and anxiety (or most commonly, some combination of both). These experiences serve as critical junctures, as each experience brings an opportunity for positive or negative reflection and, subsequently for personal and professional growth or dissociation. These experiences, which will be described in Chapter 2 as “transformative learning experiences” have been studied in other contexts, but unfortunately, little is known about the graduate teaching assistants’ perceptions of their experiences during this protracted period of professionalization and development. This study is based on the premise that the role of graduate teaching assistants is becoming more common and more important in higher education. Further, since the period during which graduate students serve in the capacity as graduate teaching assistants is likely to be a formative period in their development as future faculty members, it becomes increasingly important to understand what opportunities and challenges exist for these individuals, and to explore the ways that GTAs reflect about their practices.
Outcomes of Graduate School Experiences: Significance of this Study

Understanding the experiences of graduate teaching assistants is important because universities increasingly rely on these individuals to deliver undergraduate instruction at a time of heightened concerns about the rising cost of education and government disinvestment coupled with accountability measures targeted on “student success.” In addition, the graduate school experience is often a pipeline to faculty positions. While not all graduate students aim to work in academia, nearly all academicians were once graduate students. However, the pathway to academia is fraught with new issues and challenges. While some graduate students may be fortunate enough to find a scholarship or grant to support them financially, most graduate students must work as research or teaching assistants in order to gain tuition waivers (Ehrenberg & Rizzo, 2004). This places additional time constraints on the graduate students who serve in these positions, as well as added stress and anxiety as a result of this role.

Further, according to Lovitts and Nelson (2000), students who begin graduate programs, for a variety of reasons, may not end up completing them. Lovitts and Nelson noted that “although comprehensive national data do not exist on the consequences of graduate students’ abandoning their degree programs, forty years of studies suggest the long-term attrition rate nationwide is about 50 percent” (p. 45). The pipeline to faculty positions, therefore, is not a direct route but rather an obstacle course which future faculty must overcome.

Gaining a better understanding of the graduate students’ experiences as teachers, therefore, is critical for several reasons. First, it is in the best interest of any institution of higher education to hire the most prepared and talented faculty. In an era of accountability for career placement, it makes sense that graduate teaching assistants have access to professional
development opportunities that aid their role as instructors and prepare them for positions upon their graduation. Previous studies have suggested that having access to professional development opportunities (Worthen, 1992), supportive, collegial environments (Hirt & Muffo, 1998), and opportunities for mentorship (Jones, 1993) improve graduate student satisfaction (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001) and graduate student retention (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). While there is no direct linkage in the literature to graduate student teaching (or retention of graduate teaching assistants) specifically, it is logical to infer increased success in this facet of the graduate student experience as well.

In addition to career readiness and placement, quality experiences as a graduate teaching assistant can lead to increases in current and future job satisfaction: graduate teaching assistants would enter their new faculty role more prepared and prepped for the work ahead of them. These attributes would lead to lower attrition rates among new faculty. Boyle and Boice (1998) stated that “protégés, contrasted with unmentored newcomers, show significant career advantages” (p. 158). In addition, universities have long struggled with the recruitment and retention of highly qualified minority candidates (Cropsey, et al., 2008), and one reason could be that these individuals do not feel qualified or equipped to apply for such positions, or may perceive a lack of support for doing so. The graduate school experience can play a significant role in overcoming this gap. Clearly, the experiences that are garnered through participation as a graduate teaching assistant can influence career trajectory and lifelong success, and so these experiences need to be understood, and improved when necessary.

Too often, future faculty members are not offered ample opportunities to develop as a professional before they are charged with instructional duties (Branstetter & Handelsman,
2000; Prieto & Meyers, 1999). This comes at the expense of stress, anxiety, a lack of job satisfaction, and frustration of the graduate teaching assistant, but more strikingly, it comes at the expense of the undergraduate students who are receiving a lackluster or ineffective education as a result. Retention and attrition are important signals of undergraduate student success or failure, among other things, and in large universities, these numbers often indicate that a large percentage of first year students do not come back for a second year, and that many who begin the process of achieving a degree never finish (Hermanowicz, 2003). Since a large number of those who drop-out or discontinue their education do so in their first year, and since graduate teaching assistants are often charged with working in lower level courses, understanding the graduate teaching experience is essential to understanding and improving undergraduate education. It is, therefore, imperative to understand how graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) perceive their experiences as well as existing support structures. Further, in an era of accountability for job placement (for graduate as well as undergraduate students), understanding how the graduate teaching assistants perceive their experiences as teachers might shed insight into the pipeline to faculty positions. Investigating graduate teaching assistants’ experiences (and improving them when necessary) is the key to improving the likelihood of career success for these individuals.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The roles that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) occupy are vastly diverse from one college to the next, from one department to another, and at times even within a single
department. Little data are available to provide insight into “typical” duties or commonalities between and amongst GTAs. Further, as GTAs occupy these diverse roles, supporting them is imperative to their success. Existent literature offers insights into types of supports that have been implemented by institutions or training models perceived to be efficient, yet these studies tend to be narrowly focused on specific contexts (such as mentoring for minority females in a single natural science department, etc.). As such, these studies often neglect to address the diverse work that GTAs might be assigned. Consequently, this study has a mandate and imperative to contextualize the data by examining the perceptions of GTAs as they navigate their roles as instructors, and to understand what supports they perceive as available and important to them. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, previous literature suggests a linear process whereby disorienting dilemmas lead to positive transformation through an internal process of critical reflection. The premise of this research project was based on my supposition that disorienting dilemmas may lead to critical reflection which may lead to transformative learning experiences, but that this is only one possible outcome. Existing literature fails to address the possibility of differential outcomes rising from “disorienting dilemmas” which are generally presumed to lead to transformative learning experiences. This gap mandated the in-depth exploration of “disorienting dilemmas” that GTAs may perceive that they experience and the role that GTA support systems play in mediating or shaping the outcome of those experiences.

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work as instructors while pursuing their studies and degrees. This research sought to understand GTAs’ perceptions of their experiences and
possible “disorienting dilemmas” to understand possible paths to transformative learning experiences, and to understand interventions that shape these experiences with potentially differential outcomes. This research was guided by the following exploratory questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?

2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

Specifically, through the use of qualitative methods such as interviews and document analysis, this research used personal narratives of graduate teaching assistants to provide insights into the social context in which GTAs develop their professional identities and the intuitive norms that shape these experiences. Through these narratives, this research describes the level of perceived support available to GTAs (with focus on institutional support, mentoring, peer support, or other formal or informal support structures) and explores whether these supports are perceived as instrumental in GTA professional development. This study draws from the existing body of work on “transformative learning experiences.” As transformative learning continues to be a pervasive paradigm in higher education literature, it
is logical to explore this understudied population in light of existing research to broaden the conversation about transformative learning experiences in higher education contexts.

**Limitations**

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of graduate teaching assistants about their experiences in that role, as well as their perception of the relative impact of those experiences. This study used a small sample size but took an in-depth look at the experiences of those participants who were included in the study. This study did not aim for generalizability, nor did it seek to identify the “average” experience. Instead, the goal was to thoroughly understand some variety of experiences as data points that exist on an endless continuum of possible experiences. When themes emerged from this research, they provided insights into the how GTAs make sense of their experiences in their role of graduate teaching assistants. The aim of this study was not to produce findings that can be generalized to all graduate teaching assistants or to predict the experiences of future graduate teaching assistant, and therefore seeking to report typicality was irrelevant. Rather, this study sought to deeply understand the individual cases of selected participants in order to unearth and add insight in how individuals perceive and understand their lived experiences in the context of their shared role as graduate teaching assistant. In qualitative research, it is not uncommon for researchers to apologize for small sample sizes, but it is important to recognize that this study was never intended to produce quantitative, statistical inferences about GTAs. The small sample size allowed for a thorough, rich, in-depth understanding of these selected participants’ experiences, and the social significance of this study cannot be measured in quantitative terms.
This study examined the perceptions of graduate teaching assistants about their experiences in that role. According to Pickering (2008) it is important to realize that experience happens within social, cultural, and institutional contexts. It is always interpreted by the individual. As a result, Pickering notes that “what is gathered in the name of experience cannot simply be presented as raw data, or regarded as offering a direct expression of people’s participation in different cultural fields” (p. 19). He states that while we as researchers purport to examine and describe ‘lived’ experience, we are actually examining and describing the participants’ interpretation of “what makes [their] perceptions, feelings, and actions meaningful” (p. 19). As such, the findings of this study are not reported as “generalizable data” in the statistical sense. Rather, they are discussed as rich insights into the lives and social contexts of the selected participants. In this way, findings are relevant beyond the selected participants, and should inform the direction and importance of future research studies in this area.

Given the nature of this topic, one key potential limitation in this study is the threat to internal validity, and most specifically, research bias. Researcher bias occurs when the researcher has personal biases or a priori assumptions that she is unable to bracket from the content that is provided by the research participants (Onwuegbuzie, 2000). In this case, my professional experiences in mentoring graduate teaching assistants make it possible that my assumptions, recent memories, and/or experiences might have influenced my interactions with my participants and my perception or understanding of the data. Although some scholars contend that internal validity is less a concern in qualitative studies (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), my research plan still used several safeguards to minimize these limitations and increase
trustworthiness of the data, including: triangulation of data, member checking, and disclosure via a researcher reflective journal, which are discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 1 was to describe the proposed study as well as to provide a brief background and context to illuminate the timeliness and need for the study. In the United States, the institution of higher education is currently operating in an era of disinvestment, and as such, graduate teaching assistants are filling a financial void by trading instructional service for pay and reduced tuition rates. Opportunities to teach provide important routes to professional development for those who ultimately seek careers as faculty members in higher education. However, their experiences (and perceptions of those experiences) are largely unexplored. This chapter introduced the exploratory research questions guiding the study and provides the rationale needed to explore these questions in more depth.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature that support the conceptual framework on which this study is based. By focusing on the higher education context, it becomes clear that the changing landscape of academia has created a need for the use of graduate teaching assistants, yet the experiences of individuals in this role are largely unexplored. The literature review looks at existing research about graduate school and uses related bodies of literature about the role of mentoring, institutional/structural support and
social support to suggest that these areas may also be pertinent in the lives of graduate teaching assistants. Further, a review of literature about transformative learning experiences provides a framework to address the “disorienting dilemmas” that may be faced by graduate teaching assistants, and how these dilemmas may be moderated by the support available to them during their tenure in that role.

Chapter 3 describes the methods used in this study. Through the theoretical framework of constructivism, this study aimed to better understand how graduate teaching assistants perceive their experiences in that role and the relative impact of these experiences as they are understood by the graduate teaching assistant. As such, the chapter discusses participant selection and the use of qualitative methods for data collection. A detailed discussion of the methods, triangulation of data, and data analysis follow.

Chapter 4 provides the findings that emerged upon completion of data analysis. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) GTA perceptions of the value of their role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development. These themes are expanded into subcategories and data are used to exemplify important relationships to existing literature.

Chapter 5 discusses the implications for the findings of this study. Looking at disorienting dilemmas through micro- and macro- perspectives, this chapter shows the relevance of this study to existing conversations already taking place in the literature. This chapter also addresses the gap in the literature surrounding differential outcomes of disorienting dilemmas, and describes the variety of outcomes (in addition to positive transformation) which surfaced in the data.
Chapter 6 takes an applied focus to discuss implications from this study with practical recommendations for departments and institutions in their work and interactions with graduate teaching assistants. This chapter also offers suggestions for future research in addition to the practical implications of the findings.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this manuscript and operationally defined from the synthesis of existing literature discussed in Chapter Two.

*Faculty Mentor/Mentor* - an individual who a graduate teaching assistant has identified as a mentor, or who has been assigned as a mentor, and who serves to promote the teaching assistant’s personal or professional development.

*Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)* - a graduate teaching assistant is an individual who is working toward a Master’s or Doctoral level degree and who assists another faculty member or department in any of a variety of teaching endeavors.

*Transformative Learning Experience* - a transformative learning experience happens when an individual confronts a “disorienting dilemma” that causes the person to reassess (critically reflect on) the presuppositions on which their beliefs are based, and ultimately, the individual experiences a change in one or more ways: psychological, convictional, or behavioral.
**Disorienting Dilemma** - According to Mezirow, disorienting dilemmas are anomalous situations in which old ways of knowing cannot make sense and then become catalysts or “trigger events” that precipitate critical reflection and transformations.

**Social Support** - A graduate teaching assistant’s access to individuals or groups to whom they are connected through primary relationships, not dictated by contractual obligation but rather a sense of community and reciprocity (such as family or friends).

**Institutional/Structural Support** - A graduate teaching assistant’s access to individuals or groups to whom they are connected through secondary relationships as a result of the departmental or institutional structure (such as a departmental chairperson or a teaching and learning center on campus).

**Critical Reflection (Critical Self-Reflection)** - a term used by Mezirow to describe the process of actively challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning. Mezirow asserts that the most significant learning experiences in adulthood result from reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting.
Chapter 2: Review of Existing Literature

Introduction

Existing literature demonstrates that the landscape of higher education is shifting as both undergraduate and graduate enrollments have steadily increased. These changes have resulted in a shift in the responsibility of undergraduate instruction—as more faculty are focusing on the needs of graduate students, research, and procuring external funding, the responsibility for undergraduate student instruction often falls on contingent employees such as adjunct faculty or graduate teaching assistants. Several bodies of extant higher education literature focus on a range of topics in the periphery of this study, including undergraduate and graduate student retention and success, or the experiences of graduate students as they progress through their academic programs, focusing on the stress and anxiety often associated with academic graduate coursework. Literature can be found relating to faculty concerns in academia, including administrative issues pertaining to human resource management, and even productivity and work assignments or expectations of faculty. This body of work has looked at the experiences of new faculty members and what obstacles are faced in faculty positions, such as obtaining tenure or promotion. Also helpful is the culmination of literature focused on transformative experiences, which describes how obstacles (“disorienting dilemmas”) may lead
to positive transformation in students and faculty alike. While all of these areas of literature suggest some insights into this project, little previous research is focused specifically on the experiences of the graduate teaching assistants or their perceptions of their role in this re-imagined frontier. Given the nature and importance of their work, the following literature review demonstrates the relevance of the current study in the larger academic conversation, situating the role of graduate teaching assistants in the context of higher education and addressing the gap in existing literature about graduate teaching assistants’ experiences, perceptions of their role, and perceptions of support available to them.

**Changing Landscape of Higher Education**

The landscape of higher education is shifting. In the United States, enrollment in institutions of higher learning is on the rise. This trend is described and documented in a recent report by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center (2010), “Postsecondary enrollment rose from 14.5 million in fall 1993 to 18.7 million in fall 2006” (Baum, p. 4). More recent data from U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics (2016) confirm this trend. “Between 2002 and 2012, enrollment increased 24 percent, from 16.6 million to 20.6 million. Much of the growth between 2002 and 2012 was in full-time enrollment; the number of full-time students rose 28 percent, while the number of part-time students rose 19 percent.” In fact, in addition to the normal increases we might expect to see as a result of population growth, higher education institutions are seeing an unexpected influx of students for a variety of social reasons as well. For instance, data from the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education
Statistics (2016) show that in the last several decades, access to higher education has increased among women and minorities. Services have been made available to accommodate students with disabilities and that population of students has grown dramatically (Norlander, Shaw, & McGuire, 1990; U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). In the United States, particularly, the flexibility of program choice and the variety of programs available (Allen & Seaman, 2008) has resulted in a rise in enrollment among international student populations. Opportunities for financing, such as the G.I. Bill, Federal Financial Aid (like the Pell Grant), and other public and private opportunities for grants, scholarships, and loans has led to greater access to higher education even without an immediate out-of-pocket investment (Baum, 2010; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

Beyond the acceptance of a diverse student body and increased funding opportunities, other social factors play a role in rising college and university enrollment as well. Students in today’s classrooms are not the traditional college students of which one might stereotypically conceive. Historically, upon graduation from high school, a departing senior would pack up a few appliances and a duffle bag of sheets and clothing to embark on an adventure away from home—moving to the dorms, and attending college as a full-time resident-student. Currently, a much smaller percentage of college students — 16% as of 2001—fit this traditional profile (Levine, 2001). One reason for the trend noted above is that the stereotype that college students are generally upper-class young adults no longer impedes access of students who have other non-educational responsibilities (parents or full-time employees, for instance). Increasing enrollment amongst commuter students and part-time student populations have caused colleges and universities to burst at the seams as classes filled with students who never before
had such access (Crimmins & Riddler, 1985; U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2016).

In addition to the social factors that have led to an increased enrollment, the poor economic climate has sent people back to college for new training. As people have lost their jobs in scaled-down industries, they find it difficult (if not impossible) to replace their means of employment (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Those folks lucky enough to have survived the cuts in many industries are also seeking new skills (through the demands of employers as a condition of continued employment, or simply as a way to ensure future competitiveness in a tight and aggressive market). The search for these skills has also sent people, some whom have been out of school for years or decades, back to the classroom.

In an effort to effectively deal with the increased demand for instruction, colleges and universities often turn to a contingent workforce to fill the demand that cannot be met by full-time faculty. This contingent workforce often includes adjunct, part-time, or visiting faculty, or graduate teaching assistants (Schneirov, 2003). According to Lovitts and Nelson (2000), this has resulted in a “cumulative strain of slow but steady change—from downsizing and underfunding to increased corporatization and pervasive labor exploitation, including wholesale reliance on part-time labor and relative declines in graduate student and faculty compensation” (p. 44). As the national trend of budget reduction continues, the use of graduate teaching assistants not only in addition to, but rather instead of other contingent workers, becomes more and more prevalent as the cost of labor is less than other means. Graduate students are lured into the University through a tuition waiver, which is often exchanged for labor (as a
graduate assistant) with a limited stipend. Despite this drastic change, the experiences of graduate teaching assistants remain largely ignored in literature.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) make up a significant part of the higher education workforce. While still developing a depth of knowledge at the graduate level in their own academic studies, this critical time also serves GTA professional development functions much like “on the job training.” Boehrer and Sarkisian (1985) commented that, “In the view of some graduate teaching assistants, the job of TA is the apprenticeship to a lifelong career. For others, it is simply a convenient way for the university to disburse financial aid” (p. 7). They go on to discuss that GTAs view their position in a variety of ways, and thus for each individual GTA, “the job is an individual experience” from which GTAs “will decide for themselves what importance and meaning it has” (p. 7). Understanding how GTAs interpret and give meaning to their experiences is vital to understanding their perceptions of their roles as the experiences they have therein. To better consider ways in which GTAs interpret and give meaning to their experiences, it will be beneficial to look at a macro and micro view by examining literature that describes the significance of the social-institutional context which examines graduate student and graduate teaching assistant socialization, and also at literature that describes the significance of the individual GTAs’ identity formation within that institutional context.

Socialization. According to Wulff and Austin (2004), researchers of faculty work began realizing years ago that “the faculty career begins with the socialization process that occurs
during the graduate experience” (p. 8). Bruss and Kopala (1993) captured the experience of the socialization process well in their description of what graduate students must go through to acclimate to their new role. They state that graduate school training “may be viewed in terms of professional infancy wherein an individual enters a field with limited professional awareness, skills and understanding, and an undeveloped sense of professional identity” (p. 686). This is reasonable, as socialization is a normal and important process that happens any time an individual enters a new social context and learns the norms, values, and behaviors expected for their role or social position.

O’Meara (2008) described the importance of the socialization process in graduate education because it serves as an opportunity for graduate students to develop characteristics, attitudes, knowledge and skills, that contribute to a new professional self. However, any process of socialization is dialectical, and in the case of professional socialization which may lead to identity formation, it requires deliberate and purposeful interaction with others in the field. Bruss and Kopala (1993) stated that “the [graduate] student is dependent upon training providers to assist in clarifying their role within the environment and to assist in shaping their self-concept” (p. 687).

Nyquist, et al. (1999), however, described the challenges associated with socializing new graduate students to the culture and values within academia. “Although students' vision of academic life is often what draws them to pursue a graduate degree, most are not explicitly aware of a particular value system within the academy when they enter graduate school” (p. 20). They stated that in their research, they have found that “a significant portion of graduate student development involves efforts to demystify the values of the academy” (p. 20). This
may be because the socialization process actually begins before the graduate program—
starting with students’ preconceived notions about what graduate school will be like. O’Meara
(2008) calls this the anticipatory stage of graduate education. Institutions may offer broad
orientations for new graduate students which are intended to facilitate this early socialization
process. Programs may offer more specific orientations for incoming graduate students, but
often take for granted that by associating with faculty and peers, any misconceptions will be
cleared up and appropriate, continued socialization will take place. However, it is important for
graduate students to receive purposeful and meaningful socialization early in their programs—
according to Sweitzer (2008), “the messages that students receive in the early stages of
[graduate] education are likely to set the tone for future socialization efforts, and to influence
student perceptions of what it means to be a faculty member” (p. 53). Socialization, therefore,
is pivotal in graduate student (and graduate teaching assistant) identity formation. Despite
Wulff and Austin’s (2004) observation that the socialization process indoctrinates graduate
students into the work of faculty, little research has ensued regarding the experiences of
graduate teaching assistants or how they perceive support (or lack thereof) during their own
development as future faculty members.

**Identity formation.** According to social psychologist George Herbert Mead, identity
formation is the product of social interaction (1934). One’s self-concept, then, is shaped
through social activities and subsequent reflection and comparison between the current self-
concept and the desired one. Seeing one’s self as an academician, or having the desire to see
one’s self in that way, can impact that person’s self-concept.

Further, several scholars contend that identity can only be understood within its
sociocultural context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Olsen, 2008). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) stated that there is a dynamic taking place that helps to form teacher identity: it is both “a product (a result of influences on the teacher) and a process (a form of ongoing interaction within teacher development)” (p. 177). Olsen (2008) described identity as a label for “the collection of influences and effects from immediate contexts, prior constructs of self, social positioning, and meaning systems” (p. 139) that become integrated into the actions and reactions of a teacher and his or her interactions with others. In other words, identity formation is not a latent or unconscious process or product. Learners must become critical of their own assumptions in order to transform their unquestioned frame of reference. Through communicative learning, learners must work towards critically reflecting assumptions that underlie intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings (Cranton, 1994).

**Unique attributes of graduate teaching assistants.** It is important to acknowledge that graduate teaching assistants operate under a different reality than other groups: still developing their professional identities, GTAs may be experiencing the “disorienting dilemmas” (specific kinds of challenging life experiences which are discussed in more depth below) associated with the graduate school experience more generally. Because of the unique attributes of this particular population, it is questionable whether related literature that stems from research about existing (or even new) faculty may be broadly applied to what one might expect graduate teaching assistants should experience. Like other contingent faculty, graduate teaching assistants do not have the comfort or protection of a guaranteed continuing contract for employment. Unlike faculty though, this group is made of students who are dependent upon the university for benefits such as stipends or tuition waivers as well as latent benefits
such as validation or future letters of recommendation. As such, working as a graduate teaching assistant is a “high stakes” endeavor with unique role attributes and thus requires special attention. The stress and anxiety that can accompany this endeavor, along with the variety of new roles and expectations, may create the perfect environment for disorienting dilemmas to occur.

**Disorienting dilemmas.** The term “disorienting dilemma” has been described as a life event such as a marriage or divorce, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one, that causes a person to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information (Mezirow, 1991). What these events have in common is that they create a mental juncture where old information is confronted by new information.

Disorienting dilemmas may be embodied in stress, anxiety, fear, or any number of emotional manifestations, as an individual grapples with the cognitive dissonance that ensues. The term cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger (1962), is defined broadly as a situation that causes an individual to experience psychological discomfort due to an inconsistency between a person’s attitudes, behaviors, or emotions. Festinger believed that a person in this state would seek to reduce the discomfort, or dissonance, and further would try to avoid situations that might increase dissonance. Thus, dissonance becomes a motivator for action (which could include actively seeking to resolve the dissonance, or actively avoiding its cause).

Graduate teaching assistants, who are often contending with new role expectations (Gardner, 2008), high performance demands (Gardner, 2009), and lack of preparation (Worthen, 1992), may experience dissonance between their expectations for their experience and the reality of their circumstance. The conflict between expectations and reality may be one
contributing factor underlying the difficulties faced by graduate teaching assistants (Nerad & Miller, 1996). In fact, in their article “Stress, Coping, and Barriers to Wellness Among Psychology Graduate Students,” El-Ghoroury, et al. (2012) noted that “over 70% of the graduate students included in their sample reported a stressor that interfered with their optimal functioning” (p. 127). Stressors such as academic responsibilities, finances and debt, anxiety, and a poor work-life balance are all noted as concerns of graduate students, any of which could trigger a disorienting dilemma. It is important to note that much of this research focused broadly on graduate student stressors. Previous works, therefore, have failed to account for the additional obstacles faced by graduate teaching assistants, which are only marginally addressed in Cho, et al.’s work, which demonstrates that graduate teaching assistants often experience anxiety when approaching, developing, and delivering their own courses or course materials (Cho, Kim, Svincki, & Dekey, 2011). Studies that focus on only one aspect of the graduate teaching assistant’s experience at a time offer important glimpses into GTAs’ lives, but fail to provide a contextualized, holistic picture of GTA experiences or the GTAs’ perceptions of the impact of those experiences. Without looking at these experiences more holistically, it is impossible to surmise the cumulative effect of these experiences, or to understand how disorienting dilemmas, challenges, or opportunities for growth may arise.

Mezirow (1991) explained that disorienting dilemmas are likely to lead to what he refers to “transformative learning experiences.” The experiences previously mentioned, among others, constitute the makings of disorienting dilemmas that graduate students and graduate teaching assistants face. Yet, no research has established that there is an expected outcome from these experiences.
Transformative learning experiences. The body of literature that describes transformative learning theory offers a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience (Mezirow, 1991). Stemming from transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1991) explained that a transformative learning experience happens in response to critical reflection after a life event that triggers a disorienting dilemma, such as a marriage or divorce, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. While disorienting, these experiences offer an individual an opportunity to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information. According to Clark (1993), a transformative learning experience can result in three outcomes: psychological (a change in the way a person thinks about him or herself); convictional (a change in the person’s belief system); and behavioral changes (a change in the way a person acts or interacts with others). A transformative learning experience alters the way that a person perceives his or her self in a social context. This new perception is incorporated into the person’s personality and identity.

Many scholars agree that similar types of transformation could take place as a result of educational experiences (King, 2005; Torosyan, 2007). In an educational setting, this experience could provide the invaluable “a-ha” moment when a student realizes the importance of the content he or she is learning or has learned, and then goes on to incorporate and apply that content into his or her worldview. Transformative learning experiences are generally considered to be valuable (Mezirow, 1995) and literature even suggests that instructors can (and should) implement pedagogical strategies to promote opportunities for transformative learning experiences through the instructional designs in their courses (King,
Based on the existent higher education literature, transformative learning experiences can effect change in a person’s frame of reference, leading to a more responsible and reflective way of thinking (Mezirow, 1997), and that lifelong learning skills can be generated through facilitated transformative learning experiences (Fink, 2003; King, 2003; Mezirow, 1991, 1995).

Literature from the field of education in the area of transformative learning experience tends to focus on opportunities for transformation in two contexts. The first involves opportunities purposefully given to undergraduate students by their instructors through planned activities in their academic coursework pedagogically designed to accomplish this goal. The second involves opportunities for transformation that emerge organically in teacher preparation programs. Literature in this area often typically explores the experiences of beginning teachers and/or pre-service teachers in K-12 educational settings. As previously noted, graduate teaching assistants are developing a professional and often public identity in the professoriate during their role as GTAs and therefore share few characteristics with either of these groups—the issues that confront them are not similar to those issues faced by undergraduate students or pre-service and beginning K-12 teachers. Additionally, graduate teaching assistants are often in graduate school for a love of their discipline rather than a love of teaching and thus their insights about pedagogy are often not the same as pre-service teachers who have studied pedagogy as part of their undergraduate or graduate program.

There is a gap in the literature pertaining to the occurrence of transformative learning experiences amongst graduate teaching assistants. Looking at the ways in which transformative learning experiences have been defined and described by scholars in previous literature, it is
reasonable to infer that transformative learning experiences may be felt by graduate teaching assistants. What is impossible to infer, though, is that all individuals who are challenged by these dilemmas will prevail with similar positive outcomes often associated with transformative learning experiences in existing literature. The variety of potential outcomes merits further discussion. This study will contribute to existing literature by exploring what kinds of challenges and opportunities graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work. By using descriptions of disorienting dilemmas and transformative learning experiences that exist in the literature, this research provides insight into how the GTAs’ experiences reflect or differ from what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences.

The Role of Structural and Social Support

In part, the graduate student experience can be understood from Goffman’s (1968) description of a “total institution.” Goffman defined a total institution as a place of residence and work, where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together to lead an enclosed formally administered round of life (p. 11). While graduate students may or may not live on campus, they do often live away from their families and territorial social networks and conform to the formal and informal rules of their respective departments and universities. In this respect, several aspects of graduate school fit the description of a “total institution.”
The notion of a total institution generally takes on a negative connotation, and therefore may not describe all departments or graduate programs well. Goodman, in fact, argued that this point of view “overdraws the negative effects of graduate education and overgeneralizes their pervasiveness” (p. 214). However, there is no doubt that graduate school is a process of socialization or resocialization. Building on a review of Van Maanen and Schein’s previous research, Anderson and Swazey (1998) have noted that “graduate school as a socialization process involves divestiture, in the sense of shedding one’s previous self-conception and taking on a new view of the self that reflects one’s role and membership in the new group” (p. 9) and that many students report that graduate school changed them in ways that they do not like (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Despite the fact that research has demonstrated the difficulties with socialization into graduate school, the structure of each department often remains unchallenged as institutional or departmental culture are seldom quantifiable or overt. Often times, challenges faced by graduate students are perceived as a failure of the student: that the student wasn’t a good fit for the department (Gardner, 2008) or that the academic expectations were too challenging for the individual. Yet, in a recent study about doctoral student attrition (Golde, 2005), half of the students interviewed “reached the conclusion over the course of their first year that the particular department in which they were studying was not a good home for them” (p. 58). It is likely that these students did not feel that they had been socialized or integrated into their environments. Golde found that these students left their departments and “investigated other options and transferred to another graduate department in the same field. Subsequently, they reported being significantly more personally and intellectually satisfied; they had either finished
or anticipated finishing their degree” (p. 58). Previous research by Nerad and Miller (1996) determined that departments are likely to blame non-departmental issues such as insufficient financial support for graduate students for high attrition. They went on to note that some departments suggested “that retention rates would improve if students took more initiative and did not expect ‘handholding’ from faculty” (p. 66). While departments across a variety of disciplines do acknowledge a problem with graduate student attrition, they fail to acknowledge that the department itself may contribute to a students’ decision to leave.

Hirt and Muffo (1998) pointed out that there are four factors that influence the climate for graduate students: financial issues, personal concerns, curricular requirements, and relationships with faculty. Hirt and Muffo noted that “personal concerns for graduate students range from the type of departmental social climate they encounter to the degree of personal support they receive from friends and family” (p. 21). Their research revealed that emotional support is an important climate factor, and that graduate students with high levels of support from family, friends, and advisors are more likely to be successful in graduate school and less likely to leave before completing their degree. On the reverse, personal factors are more likely to contribute to graduate student attrition when they do not feel supported by their department or advisors. “Intertwined in graduate students’ relationships with faculty is the need for advisement. The availability and type of advising offered in a program influences both student success and satisfaction” (p. 24).

In their exploration of financial factors that influence graduate student success, Hirt and Muffo (1998) stumbled upon an interesting pattern: “the type of aid students receive is closely correlated to their success in graduate school” (p. 20). They suggest that in both the humanities
and social sciences, as well as the physical and natural sciences, graduate students who serve as teaching assistants or research assistants in a laboratory are more likely to complete their degrees than those receiving fellowships. While this correlation is unexplored in Hirt and Muffo’s research, they suggest that perhaps the time spent working closely with faculty is the mediating factor, as those students receiving fellowships often have no such faculty contact.

These studies suggest that institutional or departmental climate or culture play a role in the academic success of graduate students. Yet, this literature fails to fully take into account the additional special needs of graduate students who occupy the role of graduate teaching assistant. In addition to departmental support for academic success, it seems likely that departmental or institutional support for teaching success would be equally instrumental to a graduate teaching assistants’ personal and professional development. The notions of “structural support” (in the form of institutional or departmental support) or “social support” (in the form of socialization or emotional support by the faculty) are not mentioned in existing literature about GTAs, but the differential rates of graduate degree completion make a compelling argument that social and structural support are equally important to successful graduate teaching assistantships.

The Role of the Mentor

While many anecdotal success stories about mentoring exist, or even find their way to publication in professional magazines, few data actually the support this belief. While research has been done on mentoring as it is related to human resource development (MacDonald &
Hite, 2005; Hezlett & Gibson, 2005), there is a gap in the literature about the effects of mentoring on graduate student outcomes or successful performance in the role of teaching assistant, where future faculty are often first establishing their identity as colleagues in higher education institutions. Too often, future faculty members are not offered ample opportunities to develop as a professional before they are charged with instructional duties (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000; Prieto & Meyers, 1999). This comes at the expense of stress, anxiety, a lack of job satisfaction, and frustration of the graduate teaching assistant.

Hirt and Muffo (1998) noted that when graduate teaching assistants teach throughout the duration of their years in graduate school, their time to graduation is typically longer than their peers who serve as a graduate teaching assistant only in the early years of their graduate studies. While Hirt and Muffo failed to investigate the cause of the different rates of graduation they noted, they do speculate that teaching activities may take up too substantial an amount of time from graduate students’ schedules. While time consumption may be one factor, it may instead be that graduate teaching assistants (especially those advanced in their studies) have not received (or are no longer receiving) mentoring in regards to their teaching activities. In other words, it may not be solely the teaching activities that detract from graduate students’ attention to their studies, but it may be a lack of mentoring support to help them successfully navigate their experiences.

While existing studies specifically about the mentoring of graduate teaching assistants are absent from the literature, studies pertaining to academic success of graduate students or faculty development studies can at least provide some insight into the likely relevance of mentoring on graduate teaching assistant failure or success. For example, existing literature
does caution that anxieties and fears can be exacerbated in a group setting. In fear of being judged harshly by colleagues or appearing incapable, individuals who may be most in need of feedback and interaction may be least likely to participate. Graduate teaching assistants may look to their peers or supervisors to develop a direct (but skewed) basis for comparing their skill or depth of knowledge to that of their colleagues. These individuals run the risk of mentally withdrawing from the group setting (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zajonc, 1965). Further, when accomplished successfully collaboration can lead to shared resources, a venue for reflection on practice, and an opportunity to grapple with the difficult emotions (or possibly disorienting dilemmas) that are sometimes brought on by experiences one may encounter while working as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Having intervention in the form of a mentor may facilitate a more realistic basis for judging one’s own abilities or skills, and may offer a safe environment and ideal departmental or institutional climate for graduate teaching assistant development.

Boyle and Boice (1998) determined that structured, systematic mentoring is an effective way to increase job satisfaction and performance of new faculty members and graduate students. They found that the outcomes are more effective when the mentor has at least 3-5 years of experience already completed, and that it does not matter whether the pairs are homogenous in social categories such as race. Interestingly, they found that for new faculty, being paired with someone from another department was helpful because the new faculty members felt safer in exposing concerns or weaknesses. For graduate students, they found that pairing within the department was more successful because graduate students were not as concerned about external judgments and were able to learn more about department dynamics and politics. They determined that the components required for successful mentoring are:
“planning, structure, and assessment” (p. 173). In both studies, one major significant finding was that group meetings seemed to facilitate the best professional development, as they allowed for the generation of new ideas through collaboration. The literature seems to suggest that GTA professional development endeavors including structured collaboration with a mentor or colleagues can provide opportunities for critical reflection, growth, and transformation. When applied to the context of this study, it becomes important to look at the graduate teaching assistants’ perceptions of availability and importance of support and mentoring in navigating their experiences.

Summary

This chapter summarizes existing research about transformative learning experiences to demonstrate a gap in the literature about potential differential outcomes of disorienting dilemmas. Existing literature has established that transformative learning experiences can happen in an educational context, and that positive outcomes can result from transformation. However, past research has failed to examine the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants and their perceptions of their experiences in that role. This chapter brings together existing bodies of literature to provide some insights into the institutional and temporal context in which graduate teaching assistants may find themselves working.

Further, the review of prior works demonstrates potential role in which structural and social support, as well as mentoring, may play in graduate teaching assistants’ perception of their navigation through their experiences, yet this literature tends to focus on academic
performance of graduate students rather than the specific context of the GTAs’ role as a teacher. In order to address the gaps in the literature, this study used existing research to frame the research questions and to guide the collection of data in order to situate this study into relevant and contemporary conversations about the experiences of graduate teaching assistants. The research questions, guided by the review of literature, are:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?
2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?
3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?
4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

The research design and methods that were used to investigate these questions are discussed in depth in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work. This research has been guided by the following exploratory questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?

2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature that suggest that, despite the growing need for and use of graduate teaching assistants in higher education settings, GTAs’ experiences are largely unexplored and poorly understood. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods that
were used to address the research questions in this study, as well as to describe the participants who took part in the study and the methods used to collect and analyze the data.

**Research Design**

In order to address the research questions proposed in this study, qualitative methods were employed. As qualitative research refers to “the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 3), using this methodology was helpful in addressing the research questions, which aimed to explore graduate teaching assistants’ perspectives based on their lived experiences. This is essential, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew on Dewey’s notion of experience by noting that “people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context” (p. 2). Van Manen (1990) defines a lived experience as one that “involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself” (p. 35). The lived experiences framework allowed this research project to situate the experiences of the graduate teaching assistants in their social and institutional contexts.

This study was not looking to find representativeness or typicality of the graduate teaching assistant experience. Rather, it sought to explore the possible variations in experience, and GTAs’ perceptions of those experiences within their institutional context. As a result, I decided to approach this study by looking in depth at a smaller sample (described later in this chapter). Doing so provided opportunities to address the research questions more fully.
than “generalizable” data could. As such, Small’s (2009) notion of “case study logic” guided this project. Small believes that in some instances, particularly when statistical representativeness is an irrelevant criterion (and thus looking for “representative cases” would be a mistake) and when the research questions seek to understand the case and not to generalize from it, that “in-depth interview-based studies...may be conceived as not small-sample studies, but multiple case studies” (p. 24).

Further, drawing from the literature on the extended case study (Burawoy, 1998; Mitchell, 1983; Small, 2009), this particular research endeavor sought to provide an in-depth analysis of several cases in order to determine the “social significance” of the case rather than infer its statistical significance. Extended case studies demand that in order to study lived experience, it must be understood in both extralocal and historical context (Burawoy, 1998). Doing this allows the researcher to not only understand the particular case, but to investigate social constructs that impact the case being evaluated. Mitchell (1983) noted the importance of the interplay between the data and theory, as “the inferential process turns exclusively on the theoretically necessary linkages among the features in the case study” (p. 207). Mitchell stated that “what is important is not the content of the case study as such but the use to which the data are put to support theoretical conclusions” (p. 191). Small (2009) suggested that as a result of this unique attribute, extended case studies provide “a potentially effective way of improving theories” (p. 21).
Because extended case studies do not strive for generalizability, it is possible to examine “unique or deviant cases to improve on existing theories” (p. 21). This study, therefore, was able to look at the gap in literature about transformative learning experiences and to identify differential outcomes to disorienting dilemmas which have not been previously explored.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used a constructivist approach to understand the experiences of graduate teaching assistants. The constructivist paradigm has the intention of understanding "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36), and suggests that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). The present research values humans as “observers, participants, and agents who actively generate and transform the patterns through which they construct the realities that fit them” (Reich, 2009, p. 40). This study aimed to better understand how graduate teaching assistants perceive their experiences in that role and the relative impact of these experiences as they are understood by the graduate teaching assistant.
Table 1: Constructivist Framework and Applications to Present Study

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<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Axiology</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reality is constructed through interaction between the individual and the world.</td>
<td>Knowledge is a dynamic product of mind’s interactivity with the social world.</td>
<td>Inquiry is permeated with values, and those values should be uncovered in the research process.</td>
<td>Research should aim to understand meaning within a given context.</td>
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When applied to this study:

GTAs provided insights into their experiences of challenges or opportunities in their role. In describing their experiences in the context of the GTA role, and within departmental and institutional context (including perceived social and structural support), their narratives demonstrate the interplay between their individual experiences and the social and institutional context.

Information provided by the GTAs as well as in document analysis uncovers some of the norms of the social institution (and in this case, departmental or institutional culture). Understanding the norms and social or cultural context provide insights into how these norms shape GTAs’ perceptions (and at times, the outcomes) of their experiences.

Uncovering the experiences (including both opportunities and challenges) of the participants may help uncover the real or implied values laden in their departments and more broadly in the institutional context. Uncovering these values allows us to ask questions about how GTAs’ perceive that their departments or institutions facilitate or hinder their success.

The use of qualitative data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, document analysis, and use and analysis of a researcher reflective journal, is intended to collect data that captures meaning and importance of GTAs’ experiences within their contexts. An extended case study approach allows for thick and rich descriptions of departmental and institutional contexts.

Qualitative Techniques

The constructivist approach was essential in describing and explaining the experiences that GTAs receive during their tenure in that role, and to describing the relative impact of these experiences as they are understood by the graduate teaching assistant. In order to gain additional dimension in the data as well as “a spectrum of diverse perspectives for analysis and representation” (Saldaña, 2011 p. 76) data was collected and analyzed from three data sources: participant interviews, document analysis, and the use of the researcher reflective journal. Each of these is described below.
**Participant selection.** This study implemented dimensional sampling with purposeful selection in order to choose participants. The rationale behind the use of dimensional and purposeful sampling methods is that each graduate teaching assistant has a lived experience that is important, unique, and valuable to this study, so using a different selection technique would not yield “more accurate” or “more typical” results. Selection criteria were employed in soliciting prospective participants. All participants were solicited from a large, southeastern Research 1 university (defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as institutions that award at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees per year, with the highest amount of research activity). This was an ideal site for this study because the institution is large and diverse, it offers a full range of undergraduate and graduate programs, and employs graduate teaching assistants in a variety of disciplinary and departmental contexts. Further, this site provided institutional context consistency, although it was fully expected that differences among departments or even within departments would exist. Each prospective participant must have completed at least one academic year as a graduate teaching assistant. In order to participate in the study, each prospective participant needed to be willing to be interviewed and audiotaped on two occasions at the interviewees’ convenience, and prospective participants were aware that the total interview time was expected to last approximately two hours.

In order to solicit participants, an email with a request to participate was sent to all individuals meeting the above criteria from an institutional email distribution list (Appendix A and Appendix B). Along with the email, potential respondents received a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C). Two follow-up emails were sent to the distribution list soliciting
participation in the study to maximize the number of respondents to the greatest extent possible. The participation survey was a great success; although no compensation or remuneration was offered for participation, the response rate reached nearly 70%. Once the participation request email results had been compiled, individuals were selected through dimensional sampling. According to Arnold (1970), dimensional sampling is a mechanism used to protect against researcher bias by “laying out the dimensions along which the cases vary and then examine at least one example of each type of case” (p. 148). Dimensions used for analysis in this study included: college (academic unit), gender, race, type of assignment (taught as instructor of record/assisted another instructor/in-charge of break-out session of lab session), length of experience, and whether they have had any other teaching experience before becoming a graduate teaching assistant. From the dimensional sample generated through email response, I then used purposeful selection of select graduate teaching assistants for participation in this study. Purposeful selection is a strategy “in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). This sampling procedure was most useful because one goal that purposeful selection can uniquely achieve is capturing “the heterogeneity in the population” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89). Those selected for an interview were contacted with a follow-up email with a request to schedule a time and place for the interview. In this message, I also provided a reminder of the purpose of the study and described the kinds of topics that would be represented in the interview protocol. This way, participants had the opportunity to reflect about the topic of the interview before we met. Interviews took place in
my office or another location of the respondent’s choosing in order to facilitate their convenience and comfort.

This selection strategy may have compromised the study’s ability to speak in depth about the “typical” experiences of graduate teaching assistants, but it allowed for a more thorough exploration of individual cases, and each case became the basis for in-depth comparison, which helped “illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). Qualitative research seeks not to find “means” or “averages,” nor is it necessary for qualitative researchers to seek to typify cases into a generalization or prediction. Instead, qualitative researchers often try “to report a few, usually not a vast number of, situational experiences—not necessarily the most influential ones” (Stake, 2010, p. 57). Stake goes on to assert, however, that “the range and completeness of experience studied is not as important as picking experiences that can be said to be insightful revelations, a good contribution to personal understanding” (p. 57).

Further, although generalizability was never a goal of this study, “extrapolability from any one case study to like situations in general is based only on logical inference” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 200). In other words, while it is not possible to use findings to make statistical inferences or predict probability, it is still possible to use logic to gain a better understanding of the social world. Yin (2015) stated that rather than trying to generalize results to an entire population, such a study “should seek to develop and then discuss how its findings might have implications for an improved understanding of particular concepts” (p. 100). Further, Small states that “there is a category of empirical statement” that can be made based on findings from a case study—it can provide “ontological statements, those regarding the discovery of
something previously unknown to exist” (p. 24) He goes on to say that “a well-executed single-case study can justifiably state that a particular process, phenomenon, mechanism, tendency, type, relationship, dynamic, or practice exists” (p. 24).

One downside of the extended case method is that it is impossible to determine precisely how many participants will be needed at the onset of the study. Predetermining a sample size, according to Small (2009), employs “sampling logic” or the “principles of selection associated with standard survey research” (p. 24). He goes on to explain that in the sampling model:

- the number of units (e.g. individuals) to be studied is predetermined; the sample is meant to be representative; all units should have equal (or known) probability of selection; and all units must be subject to exactly the same questionnaire. If conducted properly, the characteristics of the sample are expected to reflect, with a margin of error, those of the population as a whole. The objective is statistical representativeness.

(p. 24)

As statistical representativeness was not the goal of this study, employing sampling logic in this way would not add to the credibility of the study. Because the interview protocol contained questions that were exploratory and open-ended in nature, I needed to be able to select cases by drawing on findings from the interview data that emerged in each previous case, as well as by drawing on themes, patterns, or unexpected discoveries that emerged from each interview.

According to Small (2009), sampling logic may be more useful when trying to describe a population, whereas case study logic may be more useful when trying to understand processes
(or, in this research, experiences) unknown before the start of the study. As such, by using case study logic, it was impossible to predetermine the exact sample size of participants (or number of cases) needed for this study. Based on previous studies of similar scope, I estimated that 5-10 participants would be needed and selected for in-depth interviews. Ultimately, I spent five months working in the field. I interviewed eight GTAs, totaling over 20 hours of recorded audio and over 600 pages of transcribed text.

**In-Depth Interviews**

In order to uncover the experiences of graduate teaching assistants, I used an interview protocol (Appendix D) as the primary method of gathering data. The questions on this protocol were derived from themes that emerged in the review of existing literature. The protocol was semi-structured, intended to leave space for the participants to direct the flow of conversation, when applicable to the research questions. Each participant was asked to respond to the same basic interview protocol, although it was necessary to allow for flexibility because of the variety of responses this protocol elicited. Further, as data from each case was collected, the insights that were brought to light from that participant helped to shape the flow of conversation in future interview iterations. The interviews with each participant took place on two separate occasions and each interview was recorded. The average duration for the first interview was approximately one hour and the average duration for the second interview was approximately an hour and a half. After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed to text in preparation for analysis.
Document Analysis

In addition to the data collected from interviews, this research was triangulated through the use of document analysis (including but not limited to: university site documents, departmental documents, press releases and social media from both the university and graduate student associations, etc.). Document analysis can be a “beneficial procedure for assessing events or processes in social groups when public records exist” (Berg, 1998, p. 245) and in this case, it provided contextual insights about the experiences of the graduate teaching assistants.

Selection of documents. A purposive sample of documents was included in this study (Berg, 1998, p. 229). Often, the documents which were selected for inclusion were those that were brought to my attention because of their relevance to an interviewee. I took careful note any time a participant mentioned a website, article, form, post, etc. At times, participants wanted to pull up websites during the interview or send links for my review as a follow up to our conversations. These documents were always of special interest to me because of their perceived importance to the participant. Using document analysis in this way assisted in triangulating the data gathered through interviews, and also assisted in facilitating a deeper understanding of institutional and social contexts.
Researcher Reflective Journal

The last data source used to provide triangulation to the research was the researcher reflective journal. According to Janesick (1999), using a journal within qualitative research projects can:

1. refine the understanding of the role of the researcher through reflection and writing, much like an artist might do;
2. refine the understanding of the responses of participants in the study, much like a physician or health care worker might do;
3. use a journal as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study, as a type of interdisciplinary triangulation of data; and
4. view journal writing as a type of connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns, and indeed their own understanding of their work as qualitative researchers. (p. 506)

The researcher reflective journal played a pivotal role throughout the research process. In addition to ultimately providing data for the study, the journal was also intended to serve as one way for me to establish authenticity and trustworthiness as a qualitative researcher. According to Carlson (2010), “observation notes, interview notes, journals, records, calendars, and various drafts of interpretation are all parts of creating audit trails” which are helpful in establishing diligence on the part of the researcher. This also helps the reader feel as though he or she is an external reviewer of the data, and it allows the reader to establish the credibility of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher reflective journal is also intended to provide the researcher with a structured opportunity to engage in reflexivity. According to
Curtin and Fossey, reflexivity happens when a researcher realized that he or she may have “a significant influence on the development of the research and the engagement of the participants” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, pp. 92-93). The researcher then has an obligation to report those potential biases and anyway in which their backgrounds or assumptions might influence the interpretations they make. The researcher reflective journal is particularly useful “for recording thoughts, feelings, uncertainties, values, beliefs, and assumptions that surface throughout the research process” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104).

Use of the researcher reflective journal and methods of analysis. During and throughout the data collection process, I used my researcher reflective journal to reflect holistically on the research process. This journal enabled me to begin to find themes in the data while the data collection process was still taking place. There were three important reasons for this iterative process. First, using an extended case study method required reflection between cases to better guide the direction of the open-ended questions from the interview protocol based on the results of the previous interviews. Another important reason for this iterative process was that the second data source—the documents that would ultimately be selected for analysis—were driven in part by data uncovered through interviews with participants. A final important reason for this iterative process is that it enabled me to return to the literature to look for existing research as I saw unexpected themes emerging during data collection. While my research was relatively structured and my initial research proposal used deductive reasoning, it was still important to maintain some degree of flexibility as the research questions were exploratory in nature and at times, led to some unanticipated findings. My researcher reflective journal itself was also subjected to analysis upon completion.
of data collection. For example, after the initial emic coding of the transcripts from the interviews of the graduate teaching assistants, I referred back to the case study methodology and re-reviewed the transcripts holistically once more and treated each of them as one in a series of case studies. Copious notes taken in the researcher reflective journal during this review provided the data for cases to be analyzed individually and through comparison and contrast for cross-case analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

The data collection process took place over a period of approximately five months. At all stages, from the review of survey responses from my solicitation for participation through the interviewing process, informal analysis of data was ongoing. This included becoming familiar with the demographic and preliminary participant data which potential interviewees reported on the survey, reviewing interview recorded audio and subsequent transcription text to become familiar with the data, and recording my reflections and reactions in my researcher reflective journal (Janesick, 1999). The researcher reflective journal was used throughout the entire research process, including before, during, and after each interview, as well as during analysis of documents, which were compiled in an ongoing manner throughout the duration of the data analysis and completion of in-depth interviews. Transcription of audio recordings began immediately after each interview. During this early stage, in vivo coding was used to help illustrate and analyze significant words or phrases that began to emerge in the interviews, documents, and the researcher reflective journal. The formal analysis of data began upon the completion of transcription of participant interviews. This process included reviewing and
coding the research memos I had been writing in my researcher reflective journal, reviewing
documents collected during the research process to triangulate the findings which had
emerged from the data, and of course, analysis of the interview data. Each data source was
manually process coded and analyzed in two separate phases.

To begin the first phase, I added analytic notes into the body of the transcribed
interviews as well as to the documents I had collected for analysis. This allowed me to
annotate and recognize the significance of key terms and quotes, and to begin to see patterns
arise in the data. Once all documents and transcripts contained analytic notes, a color-coding
scheme was employed to identify the themes that began to emerge. This phase of coding
employed an emic approach to developing the code guide for the experiences of the graduate
teaching assistants. An emic approach to coding arises out of the data and is often created with
the participants’ own words. According to Harris (1976), the term emic refers to an interactive
context in which the researcher and participant “meet and carry on a discussion about a
particular domain” (p. 331). Harris goes on to say that the “discussion is deemed productive to
the extent that the [researcher] discovers principles that represent and account for the way in
which that domain is organized or structured in the mental life” of the participant (p. 331). The
codes that emerged from this phase of coding were clustered into categories and category
labels were applied. This approach was particularly helpful in answering research questions #1,
2, and 4.

In addition to the emic approach to discovering themes that emerged about graduate
teaching assistants’ perceptions of their experiences, a second round of coding used an etic
approach to determine whether graduate teaching assistants’ descriptions of their experiences
fit the existing construct of “disorienting dilemmas” from previous literature. According to Lett (1990), “etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers” (p. 130). By examining existing literature to create a code guide, it became possible to evaluate the extent to which the existing theories about disorienting dilemmas and transformative learning apply to this previously unexplored population. This approach was meaningful, particularly in addressing research question #3. The discussion about the findings that arose from data analysis is presented in Chapter 5.

Once the themes that emerged in the data were established, categories were constructed based on those themes and their relevance to existing literature. After the categories were initially created, it was important to determine whether there was any interaction or interplay between categories. According to Saldaña (2011), “interaction refers to reverberative connections” between categories and “interplay refers to the structural and processual nature of categories” (p. 92). In other words, it was not only important to categorize themes in the data, but also to purposefully evaluate whether these themes might have connections or linkages that would make them significant not only as stand-alone themes, but also as broader examples of complex realities. During this process, it initially seemed as though twelve distinct thematic categories of data emerged, but upon closer examination of these categories, it became clear that they all fit into three broader themes. These three themes appear in Chapter 4 in the presentation of data, and those sub-categories can be seen as subheadings under each broader theme.
Establishing Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is a vital step in qualitative research, and in this study I have taken several steps to establish and maintain the highest degree of trustworthiness in this project and in me as the researcher. For instance, I have provided details about the research process including time spent in the field and a description of the amount of data collected.

Trustworthiness was a key consideration in all phases of data collection, starting with establishing my trustworthiness with the participants who would ultimately inform my study. In order to earn the trust of the participants, I started each interview by sharing my interest in the topic, my sincere concern for the underrepresentation of the experiences of graduate teaching assistants in academic literature, and by thanking them genuinely for expressing an interest in participating. I reviewed the consent form with them, explained the steps I would take to ensure their anonymity, and how their contributions would be protected. I also explained that interviewees would have the opportunity to review key components of the transcripts as well as my preliminary interpretation of themes in the data and make alterations, deletions, or changes to the text before my formal analysis began.

According to Carlson (2010), “qualitative inquiry involves the investigation of uniqueness – of unique individuals, groups, and phenomenon– each situated within unique contextual settings” (p. 1104). She went on to discuss the implications of the uniqueness of the data: “although qualitative researchers are not concerned with inter-study replication, they are concerned with corroborating or substantiating findings over time across similar situations” (p. 1104). As such, this study also employed several steps to ensure trustworthiness of the research during data collection from each data source. Data collection from interviews
included a thick and rich description of “settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104) in order to show diligence in the research process and to provide insights so that the readers may determine the extent to which the findings might be applicable to another setting. While statistical inferences cannot be made from a study with this design, logical inferences can come from a deep and thorough understanding the context and participants.

In addition to providing a thick, rich description, this study also utilized member checking in order to ensure that the data collected was consistent and congruent with the participants’ view of the information that was solicited. Members were not provided with complete copies of transcripts or raw, unpolished data, as Carlson (2010) suggested that this might confuse or overwhelm the participants—especially if they do not know how long a transcript may be or what unpolished data looks like. Instead, member checking for this study included checking key components of the transcript as well as the interpretation of the data into themes for analysis. Rather than asking the participants to verify the verbatim transcription of their words, member checking in this study solicited insights to ask participants to look at the themes that were being constructed to ask “did I understand this correctly?” or “am I on the right the right track in explaining what you meant?” As I was the sole researcher in this study, there was no need to train outside administrators or to plan for variance in the data as a result of different interviewing techniques.

In addition to those descriptions of the methods of data collection, I have also provided detailed accounts of methods of analysis. To further increase credibility of my analysis, I contracted an outside reviewer to look at samples of each data source using the same guides
for thematic analysis to determine the extent to which the outside reviewer perceived the same patterns and themes in the data. Upon consultation, the reviewer’s analysis aligned closely with mine, indicating a high degree of unanimity in our evaluation and interpretation of themes that had emerged in the data.

I have also openly disclosed my relationship to this study and my positionality which may influence my perspectives. Throughout the duration of this study, I have used my researcher reflective journal as an outlet for disclosing any ethical dilemmas where I consciously realize that my perspective may generate a bias in my interpretation of meaning. In this way, the researcher reflective journal helped provide transparency which increased the integrity of my study. Credibility was also established in a variety of ways through: a thorough review of existing, relevant literature; triangulation of data sources; the use of analytic methods, such as corroboration of transcripts with the interviewees themselves and the use of established coding and thematic analysis.

Finally, in accordance with the University of South Florida’s regulations for research involving human subjects, this project was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board before any data were collected. This process is intended to ensure the study’s overall ethical nature and to protect participants from harm. In order to ascertain IRB approval, I completed several courses including “Foundations in Human Research,” and the “CITI Basic Course for Social and Behavioral Investigators.”
Summary

This chapter discusses the methods used in this study for data collection and analysis. A review of relevant literature resulted in the following exploratory research questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?

2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

In order to answer these questions, data has been collected from three data sources: interviews with selected graduate teaching assistants, analysis of relevant documents, and finally through the analysis of my researcher reflective journal. Data has coded for thematic analysis and interviews have been compared and contrasted for cross-case analysis. Chapter 4 provides the findings that emerged upon completion of data analysis. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) GTA perceptions of the value of their role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development. These themes are expanded into subcategories and data are used to exemplify important relationships to existing literature.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work. This research has been guided by the following exploratory questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?
2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?
3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?
4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature that suggest that, despite the growing need for and use of graduate teaching assistants in higher education settings, GTAs’ experiences are largely unexplored and poorly understood. In Chapter 3, I described the methods that were used to
address the research questions in this study, including the solicitation of participants, methods of triangulating data, and analysis of data. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the participants (the data source), the data, and the findings that emerged from their analysis.

Challenges Associated with Describing the Sample

Because of the delicate nature of the data collected in this study, deciding how to represent the data was challenging. Of course a main draw of using a small sample for qualitative data collection was the ability to contextualize the data with thick and rich descriptions of “settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104). However, during member checking, even when names had been anonymized, it became clear that participants felt some degree of discomfort with the contextualization that I had provided in my descriptions. Participants felt that their experiences were at times so unique in their departments, that their stories might identify them. This presented an interesting challenge: how to provide thick, rich descriptions while holding true to my promise for complete anonymity?

In writing this chapter, I isolated quotes or experiences that were most relevant to addressing the research questions. In order to better anonymize the data, I coded each data point in reference to what it was actually exemplifying. For instance, if a participant mentioned being a racial minority in a department, then that person’s race was obviously relevant to that particular concern or circumstance, but their age might not be. I created a participant table, holding true to every demographic variable that was accounted for, but I used the coding of
data points to assign quotes to participant pseudonyms. As such, an additional layer of anonymization allowed the participants to feel comfortable with the use of their stories. In the following paragraphs, I will provide an overview of the sample and finally the profiles of the participants who informed this study.

Overview of the Sample

The eight participants in this study all met the criteria for inclusion in this study: completion of at least one academic year as a graduate teaching assistant, willingness to be interviewed and audiotaped on two occasions, and were not, at the time of the study, employed under my supervision.

Institutional context. Southeastern Elysium University is a Doctoral University with Highest Research Activity. It is home to a student body of nearly 50,000 students representing over 130 different countries, and has over 10,000 graduate students enrolled, of which over 2,100 are employed as graduate assistants. This number is significant—for comparison, during the same year the institution employed 1,900 full-time and 100 part-time faculty members.

Colleges and departments represented. Graduate teaching assistants from a variety of Southeastern Elysium University Colleges were selected for participation in this study. While all participants were employed at Southern Elysium University, the specific colleges and departments in which they are employed are not named. Rather, their departments are described dichotomously as humanities and social science departments or natural science departments. This description is intended to provide readers with enough situational context
to imagine the kind of classroom each participant may occupy while not isolating the specific department or calling into question the employment circumstances of the individuals.

**Length of service.** This research sought participants who had completed at least one year of service in the role of GTA. Participants in this study ranged in length of service from one year to seven years.

**Diversity.** GTAs who participated in this study were very diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, age, gender identification, and nationality. The sample included individuals who identify as white as well as racial or ethnic minority participants, and GTAs who described their status as either domestic or international. Represented were male and female participants who might be described as cisgender, as well as one participant who identified as genderqueer or non-binary. While not asked specifically, data collection revealed that the sample included heterosexual and gender and sexual minorities. Further, the sample was diverse in the range of ages represented amongst participants. Again, this information was not purposefully collection for inclusionary or exclusionary purposes, but conversations with participants revealed whether they had continued directly to graduate school from their undergraduate studies, placing them in a “traditionally aged student” category of approximately 22-30, as opposed to those who had taken time away from studies and returned at a later time, often years later. While questions about age did not seem relevant prior to data collection, this category stood out retrospectively as several participants discussed being older than their cohort members and GTA counterparts. Since specific data was not collected, these participants are simply classified as “non-traditionally aged” or “retuning” category, and would be described as approximately 30 years of age or older.
Roles represented. Participants were chosen to represent diverse experiences within the position which is collectively titled “graduate teaching assistant.” Interviewees held the following roles:

- **Teaching Assistant**—a funded graduate student who assists in a classroom or in an online class under the direct supervision of a faculty member

- **Lab Teaching Assistant**—a funded graduate student who is solely responsible for oversight of student learning in the laboratory who follows the established
curriculum of the department

- Instructor of Record— a funded graduate student who is solely responsible for the teaching of an in-person or online class. (Within this role, curriculum may be suggested but ultimately the curriculum development and instructional methods are the decision of the individual GTA.)

Table 3: Participant Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom GTA</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online GTA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab GTA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor of Record</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Profiles of the Participants Who Informed this Study

In order to protect the participants’ identities, their names and institutional affiliation have been changed to pseudonyms, and their specific departmental affiliations have been concealed. However, in order to give the reader a more complete picture of the participants named in the data, as well as to shed additional insight into their lived experiences in their roles as graduate teaching assistants, participant profiles are provided below.

Stan works in a natural science department and he has served his department as a graduate teaching assistant for four years. He has worked in several capacities in face-to-face classes, including roles as a lab GTA, a classroom GTA, and as an instructor of record. Stan identifies as a white male, and notes that he returned to graduate school after working successfully in private industry and in a few part-time teaching roles for over 15 years, making him older than many of the traditionally-aged graduate teaching assistants in this study (or at the university at large). An international student, Stan has worked at Southeastern Elysium University since arriving in the United States for graduate school. Stan notes that in addition to his age, being an openly gay male make him feel unique amongst his peers in his department. His goal in returning to graduate school is to earn the credentials and learn the skills to become a university professor.

Jordan identifies as a white woman, noting that she would “probably describe herself as non-binary if asked” and also a “proud representer of the LGBTQ community.” Having taken no time off after her undergraduate program, Jordan is a traditionally aged graduate student. When she entered her graduate program in a social science and humanities department, she felt nervous apprehension, but excitement, about teaching. However, after nearing the end of
her second year, she has accumulated a variety of experiences working as a GTA in other instructors’ classrooms—both face-to-face and online at Southeastern Elysium University. Her mounting excitement, however, has diminished recently as she notes that her department has actively steered her away from teaching by explaining that it is less valuable than research.

**Brooklyn** entered into her social science and humanities department as a graduate teaching assistant two years ago, immediately after completing her Bachelor’s degree—also at Southeastern Elysium University. Brooklyn is humble but conversation with her makes it clear that she is a high achiever. She is the youngest participant in this study, and a first generation college student. Brooklyn is a female graduate student, and nearing the completion of her second year as a graduate teaching assistant she has mixed feelings about her career path but feels certain that she has acquired skills to help her be successful. While she says she has become more comfortable with teaching, her heart lies in administrative roles in a university setting. Being one of only a few non-white graduate teaching assistants in her department, she believes, has given her unique insights into her experiences as an African-American student and as an employee at Southeastern Elysium University.

**Dylan** has the longest history as a graduate teaching assistant at Southeastern Elysium University. He completed one graduate degree in his social science and humanities department, and is currently working toward another degree, giving him a cumulative and uninterrupted work record of nearly seven years. Dylan describes himself as white, openly gay man, and felt that those attributes were accepted and valued by his department. In his lengthy employment, he has had opportunities to work in a variety of contexts: serving as a GTA for in classes under the supervision of various instructors of record in both face-to-face and online
modalities, and serving as the instructor of record in lower and upper division undergraduate classes. Dylan intended to complete his graduate studies in order to obtain a position as a professor at a university, but after these years of experiences, he has been reconsidering whether academia is the path he wishes to pursue.

Maxima has worked as a graduate assistant at Southeastern Elysium University for nearly three years. Her work in her respective natural science department is very diverse, despite her relatively short length of service. She has taught as a lab GTA and an instructor of record in five different courses ranging from introductory to advanced level science courses for undergraduate students. However, all of her teaching experience came in her first two and a half years in the program—at the time of her interview, she had just begun a new position currently working as a research assistant on a PI’s grant. While she enjoyed teaching, she did state that her role as a teaching assistant was not in line with her career goals. She aims to work in a research facility and found teaching to be gratifying while also feeling concerned that it was a superfluous distraction from her original goals. Super-driven, Maxima is among the younger participants in this study finishing her undergraduate studies early and moving into her graduate program immediately thereafter. Despite the demands of her work, she finds time to volunteer at local high schools. Being the only African-American in her department has encouraged her to mentor children hoping to attract more women and minorities to STEM fields.

Jenna completed her Bachelor’s degree and worked in the private sector before returning to the university to enroll in graduate studies. Jenna identifies as a white woman, and notes that she stands out from her peers due to an age gap that spans more than a decade. Her
coursework has taken her on an unplanned course of self-discovery, leading her to complete two graduate degrees in different social science and humanities departments simultaneously. This trajectory has added additional time to degree completion, with Jenna accumulating nearly four years of work history as a graduate teaching assistant. Her interdisciplinary background has qualified her to work in three different departments at Southeastern Elysium University, making Jenna the only participant who can provide comparison or contrast of roles within her own experiences in diverse work environments. Her experiences are largely in assisting other instructors in teaching their classes in both face-to-face and online environments. Jenna describes herself as an activist and enjoys teaching but hopes to be employed in a community non-profit organization.

Sterling identifies as an African-American, non-traditionally aged man. Sterling has worked as a graduate teaching assistant in a natural science department at Southeastern Elysium University for almost three years. He has nearly a decade of work experience in the private sector and continues to work while attending his graduate program on a full-time basis. His work ethic is quickly revealed through conversation with him. In his first year as a graduate teaching assistant, he was recruited to work as a GTA in an instructor’s online class. The instructor valued his contributions so much that she sought to keep him in this online role for several semesters, and even enlisted him to redesign and create materials for an updated iteration of the course. Sterling’s background as a working professional contributes to his penchant for teamwork. He enjoys the contributions to teaching he has made thus far, although he still notes some concern and trepidation at the idea of entering the classroom as the instructor of record someday.
Sanjay arrived in the United States almost six years ago when he enrolled as an international student in his graduate program in a social science and humanities department at Southeastern Elysium University. He identifies as a traditionally aged Indian man. Sanjay came to Southeastern Elysium University hoping to gain the skills and experiences he would need to compete on the job market for a position as a professor at a research driven university. His position as a graduate teaching assistant is very important to him. Sanjay explained to me that because of his visa status, he is not permitted to obtain employment outside of the university. His ability to defray his expenses and remain enrolled in his program depends on his salary as a graduate teaching assistant, and his ability to remain in this country depends on his status as a full-time student. While graduate school is a high-stakes endeavor for anyone, Sanjay’s particular circumstance made his venture seem an even greater gamble. Despite six years of positive appraisals from supervisors as he has worked as a GTA in other instructors’ classes as well as in the role of instructor of record, the concern about his international status still looms over him.
Findings that Emerged from the Data

Upon completion of the coding and analysis of hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, documents, and use of the researcher reflective journal, it became necessary to determine which data would be most useful for presentation in this study, and which data would have to remain unused at this time. Strict attention was paid to the purpose of this study, and the data presented will illustrate only those findings most relevant to the research questions.

Ultimately, three thematic areas emerged from the data. Those three areas include: (1)
GTA perceptions of the value of their role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development.

**Theme #1: GTA Perceptions of the Value of Their Role**

The first theme that emerged in the data pertained to the GTAs’ perceptions of the value of their role. This theme pertains to the participants’ views of themselves and their role within their departmental and institutional context.

**Participants’ perceptions of the importance of the GTA role.** When asked whether they perceived their role as important, all participants universally responded with some variation of a single response: “it depends.” All participants recognized their own value and contributions to the undergraduate students they have served, as well as their value to their respective departments, and the university. Many also noted that they did feel valued by their students, and that value has been reflected in grateful emails they have received or in their end-of-semester evaluations. Yet, they struggled to identify examples of how their importance or value has been externally recognized at any level by the institution. This may be in part because they felt a conflict between their institution’s values and their assigned duties. Specifically, according to Nyquist, Manning, and Wulff (1999), graduate teaching assistants “often internalize the ambiguity surrounding the relative value of teaching and research and are subsequently pulled in opposite directions” (p. 23). This confusion and ambiguity stood out in the data as several participants shared stories about work they have done which may be
considered “above and beyond the call of duty.” For instance, Dylan described an undergraduate student from his class who was “not even a major” in his department, but who desperately needed help in applying for graduate programs and was floundering because she “had no guidance from tenured faculty members.” He described his vacillation in deciding how to handle the situation:

So I went back and forth... I mean I wasn’t getting paid for this, nobody even knew about it, but that was something that was really important for that student. And now she’s off at a master’s program and she’s really, really happy and I... I mean not that I want to take credit for it... but had I not, you know, helped and pitched in, I’m not sure whether it would’ve worked out exactly in the way that it did for her, you know, getting into her top choice and then having multiple offers to choose from even. So, is the role important? It’s important in terms of the educational outcomes, career readiness, career preparations, and graduate school, those kinds of things, you know, in ways that are really, really meaningful at least for those students. (Dylan)

On the one hand, although he knew that his contributions would be valued by the student for whom he would be putting in the effort, Dylan acknowledged that he was doing extra work for which he knew he would get no pay and no formal recognition. In this way, Dylan demonstrated that he felt valued—but that the sense of value came from the undergraduate student(s), not from those individuals who were responsible for evaluating his work or who held the power or prestige to write him recommendation letters, nominate him for awards, or perform other tasks that could be meaningful to his future career trajectory.

Following a similar trend, several participants including Jordan voiced loathing about the lack of
recognition Southeastern Elysium University has provided:

I don’t think we’re important to Southeastern Elysium University, I think we’re important for Southeastern Elysium University. I don’t think we’re valued by individual colleges or by the upper echelons like the deans and provosts and such. I think we’re used as a labor pool. And they know that we have no power to change that system.

(Jordan)

Participants struggled to answer follow up questions about where such recognition might come from, although several did mention that additional recognition at the departmental level would be welcomed. Perhaps this struggle stems from the fact that above the departmental level, participants felt anonymous and disconnected from their institution. Brooklyn, who had previously earned her undergraduate degree from Southeastern Elysium University, succinctly stated: “I don’t feel like I’m a part of the University, I feel like I’m more a part of my specific department. I don’t feel much school spirit anymore, like I just... I’m in grad school. It’s the beginning of the academic silos. No more integration...” This feeling of disconnectedness offers insight into why participants struggled to identify where external recognition might come from. Feeling anonymous in a large institution not only created a feeling of disconnect, but also a lack of understanding about the organizational structure, including a lack of awareness of both institutional accountability and also institutional outreach and support. This feeling of disconnect may contribute to perceptions of being undervalued in two ways: first, in terms of importance to the university, and also in terms of compensation for labor performed, which is further discussed below.
Workload and compensation. All of the participants in this study worked as salaried employees during their tenure as GTAs. One participant reported a temporary departmental policy that required GTAs to fill out time sheets, but noted that the supervisor instructed him to simply pick a couple of days and calculate the correct amount of hours to add to the maximum number of hours available. While a few participants mentioned that their hours fluctuated widely so that some weeks they felt underworked, most participants consistently reported feeling overworked and underpaid. Dylan described the workload as being overwhelming, and stated:

It was a lot of work. I got to where it was so bad if... You know, if I woke up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I would check my e-mails while I was, uhhh, sitting on the toilet at 3 o’clock in the morning. When I actually tried to keep track of my hours, I would have to sit and think, ‘did I work from 7:00 to 10:00 on Monday? Who knows?’ It ended up being that I would just do what I had always done, which is work here, there and everywhere every time day, night, whenever. You know, at Starbucks, at home, on campus, in the office, in the library... in the bathroom. (Dylan)

Without context, one might argue that Dylan and others in this study are simply struggling with time management, especially given the workload required of GTAs in addition to their full-time student status. However, existing studies suggest that the unstructured nature of the work assignment (Eddleston, Mulki, & Clair, 2017) the struggle of role strain and balancing multiple identities (Colbeck, 2008; Jazvac-Martek, 2009), especially when combined with the novice status of GTAs trying to make a positive impression on their supervisors, creates an environment ripe for overwork. Sterling succinctly stated a common sentiment found in these
“The spoken of the unspoken is don’t rock the boat. Keep your head down. Do whatever you have to—to get it done.” Sterling’s statement was in response to a question about workload. He felt that the hours he was appointed for were irrelevant to the actual work he felt compelled to complete. He worried that complaining about the work would cause additional strain for him and for his relationship with the department: either supervisors would believe he was not competent or capable of performing the work, or that he wasn’t taking his position seriously enough. He ultimately decided not to complain, because his concern about remaining in the good graces of his department was more important than his concern about working too many hours.

The aforementioned comments were in response to conversation about workload, but when asked about compensation, participants were very quick to acknowledge that workload and compensation were inextricably linked. However, their concerns over low pay seemed to be directed at structural and systematic causes (rather than departmental causes or factors or decisions that were directed toward them personally). Yet, the challenges associated with low pay were very clearly articulated. Maxima elaborated:

Nobody expects, graduate teaching assistants to have brand new BMW’s and beach houses or something, but at the same time the struggle is real... you know, trying to...trying to make it from week-to-week or month-to-month or especially during the summers or those times, you know, before paydays and things where you’re really worried about—on top of trying to be a good teacher and trying to be a good graduate student—you’re also worried about like, okay, well how am I going to pay the rent next month, you know, by the first? The pay is quite low, I think, for the amount of work that
is being accomplished for the good of the department. (Maxima)

While some departments have previously acknowledged that graduate student attrition may be attributed to “insufficient financial support for graduate students” (Nerad & Miller, 1996, p. 66), other studies indicate that “few students depart primarily for financial reasons” (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000, p. 50). Although it has been established that “salaries of graduate employees have not kept pace with inflation (Watt, 1997, p. 245), it is not entirely clear whether or not financial constraints actually drive students out of graduate programs; however, data in this study revealed that high workload coupled with low compensation is a major factor of concern for graduate teaching assistants.

All of the participants in this study were aware of GradSolidarity—the graduate student union—yet no one from this sample had mentioned ever lodging any formal complaint. Unprompted, Sanjay explained why the high-stakes nature of keeping his GTA position may have caused him to accept an unfair working condition: We’re overworked. We’re doing way more that we’re supposed to... working 30, 40 hours per week. But I can’t say anything because if this gets screwed up, I get deported.” Sanjay’s experience is challenging, but certainly not unique. Foreign graduate student are not only continuing to enroll in American institutions, but they are actually serving institutions and fields of study in crucial ways (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983; Fisher, 1985). Fisher (1985) noted that “foreign graduate students, who are often most numerous in the very fields American undergraduates are now flocking to, have had to be thrust into the TA role in great numbers” (p. 64). Many graduate students who plan to work as graduate teaching assistants arrive in the United States with an F1 visa. This visa requires that students remain enrolled full-time and often restricts students from engaging in employment,
other than working part-time, on campus. Graduate teaching assistants like Sanjay, then, who must remain enrolled full-time to continue staying in the country, and especially those who depend on the stipends from their GTA position to cover their living expenses, feel additional pressure to comply with the demands of their supervisors or departments.

Summary of Theme #1

Given that existing research has revealed that two main stressors for graduate students in general are time constraints and financial constraints (Cahir & Morris, 1991), it makes sense that these issues would come up in interviews with graduate teaching assistants. What has remained unexplored, however, is the impact of these concerns when the cause of increased time constraint and financial constraint is the result of the employment conditions of the GTA role. This study sheds light on that dynamic. Participants’ descriptions of feeling overworked and undercompensated were intertwined with their perceptions of the importance of their role in the greater institutional and broader academic contexts. To fully understand the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants (including challenges, supports, and the transformative impacts of these experiences), their perceptions about the value (including their perceptions of both importance and compensation) of their role must be understood through this contextual lens.
Theme #2: Navigating Institutional Context- Hierarchies, Obstacles, and Support

The second theme that emerged from the data pertains to participants’ perception of structural supports or obstacles they encounter in their role given their departmental and institutional contexts.

Perceived hierarchies and microaggressions. All participants in this study described both manifest and latent hierarchies that they have encountered in their roles. Some of these hierarchies seem purposeful and thoughtful (for example, a senior level GTA would be appointed to mentor a junior level GTA), but others (such as giving copy codes only to senior GTAs when there were no apparent differences in the nature of their assignments) are difficult to rationalize. Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2014) used the term “hierarchical microaggressions to represent the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person in the institution” (p. 61). Their research particularly applied to regular employees of university campuses (such as faculty and staff), but neglected to consider the ways that hierarchical microaggressions might impact GTAs, who occupy a liminal space that includes their dual status as students as well as employees with contractual obligation to the university. Participants described their (low) position in the hierarchy and the ways in which they perceived that position had an impact on their daily experiences. Jordan provided an example of how she perceived that her status was at least partially responsible for a disproportionate workload: “I very clearly remember several times when I’d be bringing home papers to grade, like 80 in a stack... which amounts to more than 400 sheets of paper... home with me, you know, at Thanksgiving. So I’m grading papers during my family’s Thanksgiving
holiday dinner.” In this quote, Jordan described an occasion in which she was working as an assistant in another instructor’s class. She lacked the control or autonomy to make decisions about the schedule or content of the course assignments, yet because of her position, she was obligated to deal with the subsequent workload at the instructor’s behest. Maxima echoed a similar sentiment based on her work in a natural science department, illustrating that this feeling wasn’t dictated by academic discipline:

I know this is my job, but the professor I’m TAing for, he’s probably got a six-figure salary. Now that I’m thinking about it, it is crazy—I can’t isolate a single thing that the professor actually does! We only see him when he comes in to teach his class, and only ever on the day he teaches. You won’t see him any other time. We do a lot more work than the professors. So, why can’t the TA get a TA?! I am here grading all of your papers while you sip your wine and cuddle up with your kids to watch Empire on Wednesday nights. You know, let me email you half of these papers so that I can have a night with my family. We don’t get time off. They call meetings on weekends, they want us to work during holidays. I can’t remember the last time I had a whole day where I could physically and mentally be away from work. I need to hurry up and get my doctorate so I can stop working so hard. (Maxima)

Maxima indicated that her position as a GTA was lower on the institutional hierarchy than that of the professors for whom she worked, and she attributed the unfair workload she perceived as a result of this hierarchy. She further solidified her strong belief in the pervasiveness of this hierarchy when she asserted that finishing her graduate studies would ensure that she would not have to continue to work so hard.
Many participants were interested in discussing the hierarchies that they had encountered and some even offered speculation about why they are in place. Jenna poignantly stated that:

It is unfortunate that there is just so much power and privilege and a lack of understanding of intersectionality that keeps predominately white and predominately male older people in those positions of power. For them, the status quo is perfectly fine because you have to earn your right to be a PhD and earn the right to be a professor and so you have to pay your dues, because that’s what they had to go through. (Jenna)

This notion of “earning your right and paying your dues” came up in several interviews. This notion illustrates the hierarchy and microaggressions that accompany it: those in higher ranking positions are described by participants as “entitled” to subject those in lower ranking positions to duress because they had to persevere through similar treatment as they worked their way up the hierarchy. When participants perceive this behavior, those in powerful positions can be seen not only as gate-keepers, but also as obstacles to GTA progress. Dylan described his experience as a GTA as akin to an initiation process. He even referred to the University’s policy on hazing, which I was able to access during our conversation. As the participant accurately summarized, the policy states that hazing includes any activity expected of someone joining a group (or to maintain full status in a group) that humiliates, degrades or risks emotional and/or physical harm or stress, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. Examples of hazing include deception, assigning demerits, silence periods or other social isolation, deprivation of privileges, and assigning tasks to newcomers that are not assigned to others, as well as verbal abuse, threats of abuse, sleep deprivation, or other forced or coerced behaviors.
which could result in extreme embarrassment; other forced activity that which could adversely affect the mental health or dignity of the student. Dylan felt that he had experienced all of these criteria, but that he also experienced some dissonance in his understanding of these situations.

While Dylan felt (and occasionally complained to supervisors) that the situations he experienced were not ideal working conditions, faculty and administrators in his department assured him that “they were preparing him for the life of an academic” and that “they had persevered in similar conditions and they felt confident that he could too.” It becomes especially difficult to discern intent (what is the goal of producing and reproducing such hierarchies?) from impact (what is the outcome?) when occasionally those hierarchies work in the favor of a particular GTA. By Gramsci’s standards, examples like these demonstrate the way hegemony works, as he explains “the idea that forms of social life are not maintained solely or primarily by force, but are supported by the diffusion of ideas which block off any alter-native vision of society” (p. 93). Sterling provided an excellent example of a micro-hierarchy that benefited him: “I never had to compete for a teaching position in the summer. It wasn’t competitive. I mean, because doctoral students always have preference.” Sterling was able to benefit from a slightly higher position on the hierarchy that had been established in his department, so in this case, the outcome was in his favor. Those few, rare instances of positive outcomes for individuals who are most often disadvantaged by a system or institutional structure provide the hegemonic context essential to keeping the microcosm of inequality unchecked and in place.
Urban legends. No questions in my interview protocol asked respondents to report urban legends, yet every single participant did exactly that at some point during their interviews. Most commonly, this would happen when a participant would relay an experience or a situation that may be seen as unfavorable. Immediately thereafter, they would juxtapose their experience by telling me a follow-up story that they had heard about a department that treated a GTA really poorly or of a harrowing experience that another GTA had to withstand. In this way, urban legends served as enabling fictions—stories that served to minimize the impact of an experience that a particular GTA or group of GTAs had to withstand. In my interviews, the conversation flowed as though it were written into a script: minimize your negative experience by contrasting it with a worse one. Stan, for instance, pointed out that:

I was lucky because my instructor-of-record is the type of supportive person that I can rely on, you know, to help me. But I’ve also heard of other instructors who are very hands off. They say ‘I’m the instructor of record, but the only time I want you to contact me is at the end of the semester when it’s time to turn grades in. (Stan)

Stan was actually responding to a question about challenges he had faced in his role as a GTA. After offering some thoughts pertaining to the challenges, my transcripts reminded me that I responded with: “Wow. That sounds like it must have been difficult.” This is when Stan intervened, and as a way to assure me that his experience wasn’t “as bad as it could have been,” he offered his telling of how he has heard of other graduate teaching assistants experiencing far worse, so by comparison, he felt lucky.

I noticed this same conversational pattern in Sanjay’s interview also. I followed up by asking him to reflect on where these collective stories seemed to originate. Sanjay offered a
There seems to be kind of an air, at least in the department that I was in, of, ‘well, yeah you’re getting, you know... pity money, you know... we’re chasing pennies. That’s really what it feels like. It’s like they dangle funding like a carrot in front of you and everyone has to try to run their fastest to get to it. But I think the reason that the department feels okay with it or less inclined to kind of want to work on those things, is because they point to other students in other departments and they say well you don’t have it as bad as those people over there. (Sanjay)

These stories share characteristics of urban legends. According to Llewellyn (1996):

urban legends are instances of folklore in the oral tradition which are memorable, repeatable and appropriate in some recurring social situations. The story in an urban legend is believable, involves the actions of regular people, and is set in the recent past. Usually the teller and the hearer are of the same locale and generation. The action being described happened "around here" but to an unnamed, near-acquaintance. (p. 17)

These collective stories of other graduate teaching assistants facing a more treacherous fate may not be true at all, but the stories continue to circulate in institutional collective consciousness because they are believable and because they speak to a shared human condition. The significance of these stories lies more in their function than in their content or accuracy, which is why it is important to differentiate urban legends from rumors or gossip. According to DiFonzo & Bordia, (2007), rumors tend to arise when ambiguous or threatening situations cause people to provide their own explanations for what they observe, and gossip
tends to serve as a form of socialization and mechanism for preventing social isolation. Urban legends are different: they serve to make meaning of aspects of social life (as opposed to “needing to belong... or needing to understand an ambiguous situation” DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, p. 29).

Further, urban legends encompass a broader meaning—there is a lesson, or a moral, to be learned from an urban legend. While the specific content of the urban legend may be false, that does not mean that the story is without value. Llewellyn suggests that “urban legends are subtle ways of taking the public pulse and as such they represent a valuable resource” (p. 22). If urban legends are circulating about the plight of graduate teaching assistants in nearby departments who are more overworked, who lost funding at the whim of a disgruntled supervisor, or worse... these stories might indicate a collective concern about the stability and security of the GTA position. DiFonzo and Bordia argue that “urban legends therefore function to convey mores and values” (p. 32). Based on the data that emerged in the present study, however, I would also argue that the intended function of urban legends may vary depending on who is sharing the story. In the cases above, urban legends were not only shared amongst peers, but at times they were shared by individuals in positions of authority with individuals who they were responsible for managing or evaluating. In these cases, the transmission of urban legends may have also served to subtly reinforce the departments’ expectations for GTAs’ conformity and compliance. In using urban legends as enabling fictions, these stories served as one additional way to subtly diffuse and maintain the hegemonic values of the departments and institution. These hegemonic values are part of the departmental and institutional culture, which are discussed in the next two sections.
**Departmental culture.** Data in this study revealed that satisfaction with the GTA role was directly connected to the departmental culture that surrounds teaching. A major theme that emerged pertained to the GTA’s perception of their own ability to advance skill in their teaching. For those who reported working in a department that had little interest in pedagogy, or those departments with faculty members who actively steer GTAs away from teaching endeavors, GTA morale was markedly lower than the morale of those coming from departments that encouraged and embraced teaching.

Jordan, who had been discouraged from pursuing her interest in teaching, demonstrated the depth of her struggles when I asked her to describe a “best day” as a GTA. She sat quietly for several long moments before finally responding: “Best day at work, wow! Up until you asked that question I thought there had been some good ones.” Jordan was distressed when she realized that she was struggling to isolate an example of a “best day.” She went on to explain that many days fell short of being a “best day” because something would inevitably happen that would “take the wind out of her sails.” She gave several salient examples—one was a story of the first time a student told her that she was considering changing her major because Jordan’s teaching was so impactful. She tried to share this exciting news with her advisor but was told that this was “evidence that she was spending too much time teaching and not enough time doing research.” Wanting to be a teacher in a department that valued research, Jordan said, “makes it really difficult to come here and have a good day.”

Jenna faced similar challenges with being passionate about teaching while working in a department that did not seem to share that value. She discussed the joy she felt after taking a class centered on pedagogy outside her department, but the difficulties she experienced in
trying to incorporate some of her newfound knowledge into her GTA role:

It was completely by accident that I ended up in a pedagogy class outside of my department, and that was the defining class for me of my entire graduate career. I actually wanted to take a different class, but it conflicted with my schedule. So, I just took this class as a complete fluke, and it ended up being the most amazing class because the professor—she is a wonderful, wonderful... I just can’t say enough good things. The class was absolutely transformational for me. If I hadn’t had that class, I don’t think I would be as confident in my teaching as I am now. The hard part, though, was going back to my department and trying to sneak some of it in, you know, the good pedagogy. But, there was some pushback in a sense of, I was just a graduate student. I was the TA. I just needed to sort of sit down and shut up and do my job, like my job was to grade and not necessarily challenge the status quo. (Jenna)

Jenna’s experience was not unique in that respect. Other participants noticed the challenge of learning and integrating content from sources outside the department.

Earlier, Brooklyn mentioned that she felt that her experiences in graduate school, particularly while working as a graduate teaching assistant, opened her eyes to the “academic silos” or the purposeful separation between academic disciplines. Jenna’s experience exemplifies another way that academic silos impact graduate teaching assistants’ perception of their work in the departmental context. Having acquired new pedagogical skills in another department, Jenna felt unwelcomed from sharing these practices in her home department. While there are many advantages of departmental pedagogy training programs (such as their ability to take a discipline-specific approach), there are times when departments may not have
“command of resources [to accomplish such program... or they may be headed by faculty without] knowledge of current educational research or innovative teaching practices” (Smock & Menges, 1985, p. 26). Departments lacking in teacher training programs that encourage innovation, therefore, may be reluctant to encourage an inexperienced teacher such as a graduate teaching assistant to implement pedagogical strategies with which they are not familiar. Jenna found this experience to be stifling in the development of her teaching skills.

Brooklyn, on the other hand, was very excited to talk about her departmental culture as it pertains to teaching:

The department had a dedicated pedagogy person that was available to talk to us about teaching concerns. It was amazing. First of all, we all knew that this person didn’t just hold that title; he actually practiced what he preached. So when we went in with questions, he would ask us questions back. He taught us to come up with our own curriculum—and everything was always positive reinforcement, positive reinforcement, so you weren’t afraid to make mistakes, like that was the part of the process of learning process. I wasn’t TAing for the pedagogy person either, which was nice. He wasn’t there to evaluate me. The pedagogy expert and our instructors who worked with TAs seemed to share a set of core values, even though they all taught differently. He was there to help the TAs understand and adhere to those core principles, and so it was just amazing. (Brooklyn)

Brooklyn’s contrasting experience shows how she felt her pedagogical training and opportunities to try new teaching techniques as a graduate teaching assistant made her perception of the experience very different than Jenna’s. Jenna reported feeling discouraged in
developing her teaching skills whereas Brooklyn felt encouraged and was able to reflect positively on her experience overall. Since Jenna and Brooklyn reported such differences in their perceptions of how their departments (or respective faculty members) viewed their pedagogical development, I was curious to see if any difference would manifest in departmental documents that conveyed information about the GTA assignment or the teaching experiences GTAs might have.

From this review, it became evident that having a departmental culture that embraces pedagogy and teaching is evidenced in departmental structure. For instance, document analysis of webpages for faculty from departments such as those contrasted above reveal that the latter of these two departments has at least one full-time faculty member who specializes in pedagogy, and the department requires a graduate course in pedagogy which is required for GTAs and a standard part of their curricular requisites. The other two contrasting departments may have similar faculty members or course offerings, but no such information could be ascertained from the documents available for analysis. Publicly demonstrating a commitment to pedagogy is an example of the way departmental culture is created, conveyed, and upheld. While not all participants in this study intend to become instructional faculty in their future careers, all were certainly aware that they have been employed as graduate teaching assistants—and a department culture that supports and promotes a sincere appreciation for teaching also conveys appreciation for those in this role.

**Institutional culture and perceived misuse of power.** In addition to departmental culture, the broader institutional culture also played a role in GTAs’ description of their experiences. Most participants in this study were not actively involved in the graduate student
union (GradSolidarity), but all participants mentioned the union when they talked about workload or compensation concerns. Several mentioned a specific campaign (“The Wilted Dreams Campaign” with which I was previously unfamiliar). Participants talked about their familiarity with the campaign, which was intended to shed light on the low pay and unfair working conditions of graduate teaching assistants at Southeastern Elysium University. Indeed, social media response to #WiltedDreams demonstrates the popularity of this campaign. This was the second such campaign—an earlier one (called “What’s a GTA Worth”) predated the Wilted Dreams Campaign, but was also reignited and prompted substantial response in social media with tag #WhatsaGTAWorth. In these public campaigns, the Southeastern Elysium University graduate student union (GradSolidarity) communicated with members and non-members, particularly during times that the Southeastern Elysium University-graduate student union negotiated during their collective bargaining sessions. GradSolidarity felt frustrated and disenchanted in the bargaining process—as several of their Twitter posts revealed.

![Figure #1: GradSolidarity Social Media Post](image-url)
Each of these public posts was intended to shame the university for its treatment of graduate teaching assistants in terms of what GradSolidarity perceived as unfair employment practices. As the official voice of graduate students at this institution, GradSolidarity’s public stance against the institution sheds light on the discontent about GTA employment.

Participants in this study noted similar concerns, and referred to Southeastern Elysium University-GradSolidarity negotiations to express discontent with the perceived institutional
culture. One participant stated that many of his colleagues were involved in the Wilted Dreams Campaign, and that it was difficult to watch them “going without food or worrying about making rent” and how witnessing their struggles was “very upsetting” to him. Other participants voiced their concerns about healthcare, and the university’s stand on paying premiums (an evolving and hotly contested item during recent bargaining negotiations, pertaining to whether the university should pay any premiums at all for GTAs, or leave the entire cost of healthcare for GTAs to cover). In fact, GradSolidarity supported GTAs by posting and retweeting their stories on Twitter and Facebook, and other social media. The following two images (Figures #4 and #5) represent photographs used in the social media campaign, with descriptions of each story to provide context. These stories clearly made an impact, at least on those GTAs with whom I spoke. During interviews, the following two stories were recounted by participants, although none of the participants mentioned personally knowing either of these individuals.
GradSolidarity’s Wilted Dreams Campaign revealed problems with the GTA employment contract as it pertains to absences and missed days of work. This particular graduate teaching assistant shared a heart wrenching story of the loss of her child on a Thursday. She explained that she had to go back to work the following Monday to avoid losing her income, her health insurance, and possibly being required to repay the institution for the tuition she had already received.
When Southeastern Elysium University moved to decrease its responsibility toward graduate teaching assistant healthcare expenses, it announced that GTAs would be responsible for paying out of pocket for the rising costs of those premiums. This was a point of major contention with GradSolidarity, who sought during their opportunity for collective bargaining to ensure that the university would continue to support GTAs’ healthcare benefit. They shared the story of a PhD-level graduate teaching assistant who stated that she worked hard—sometimes 60-80 hours per week—for the university, in exchange for a tuition waiver and a stipend of $12,000 per year. In the midst of her graduate program, she was diagnosed with...
stage 3 cancer and was dependent on her health insurance for her medications and treatments (some of which, she noted, amounted to more than her annual wage). She feared that if the university followed through on its plan to offset the cost of premiums by requiring GTAs to shoulder the expense, she would no longer be able to afford her life-sustaining treatments.

These two stories are only examples of dozens of similar stories posted publically in these social media campaigns. Fairly consistently, these concerns reflected on the institution, and not departmental decisions or the administrators of the local departments to which the GTA belonged. These issues came up in various ways during interviews—some participants mentioned their perspectives about institutional shortcomings when answering my question about support that was available for GTAs. Others, such as Dylan, juxtaposed the institutional issues with departmental ones while discussing whether or not he felt valued in his role. He noted:

It’s not necessarily the department’s fault. To some degree, I think it is kind of systemic issue. The tuition waivers are good, and the insurance and travel money, those all really help. But a lot of that money, from the perspective of a graduate student—of a TA—it is kind of like ‘funny money.’ You know, no one walks over there with a bag of money and actually pays your tuition for you. And that money doesn’t get deposited into your bank account. You can’t borrow it to pay your rent if you need to. You can’t buy groceries with it if you are hungry. It isn’t money that I ever see. (Dylan)

Dylan’s quote illustrates the kind of power dynamic that is sometimes employed in a large, complex organization like Southeastern Elysium University, which Michael Lerner (1986) refers to as bureaucratic control. Lerner states that bureaucratic control is “wonderful for mystifying
the basic power relationships at work... and indeed, even when you get to the very top [of the organization], those with power will tell you that they are merely following rules of procedure forced upon them” (p. 63) by the structure or impersonal governance of the organization.

Stan concisely noted how a lack of alternative models keeps GTAs in a position of powerlessness: “I only have experience in graduate school with one institution—you know—you don’t even know what you don’t know. They just keep telling me I need to be grateful for what I have.” In addition to lacking familiarity with other institutions to provide a basis of comparison, Stan’s statement illustrates how a lack of transparency can be used to exert control over individuals operating within the institution. Lerner (1986) goes on to explain that organizations that employ bureaucratic power structures are also more likely to have a separate set of rules governing each job, and in these large organizations, “hundreds or sometimes thousands of job titles and descriptions help separate the workers from each other” (p.63). This creates a system which encourages an individualistic view of one’s own position, and provides a rationale for why an action that advances or benefits one employee may not necessarily be received the same way for the next employee. So, in addition to not being able to compare one institution with another as Stan pointed out, employees struggle to even compare one job to another within a single institutional context. This is significant because the inability to draw direct comparisons to jobs, titles, tasks, and responsibilities of peers creates an inability to measure whether workloads and compensation are fair and comparable. It denies workers the possibility to complain about a seemingly disparate assignment.

Lerner argues that the impact of this form of bureaucratic control is significant. The subsequent learned helplessness that ensues when an employee can’t figure out a system that
is supposed to be based on “fair processes” causes harm to the employee’s psychological well-being. “The impact on workers is to reinforce their tendency towards self-blaming. Workers come to feel guilty that the problems they face are their own failures to adjust to the given reality. They end up blaming themselves for aspects of their situations that are built into the structure” (Lerner, 1986, p.64) of the organizations for which they work. Again, GradSolidarity publically echoed this sentiment:

GradSolidarity’s claim that the university depends on GTA’s sense of gratitude, demoralization, and willingness to sacrifice may seem a stretch, especially given that previous research shows that healthy, happy workers are more productive than demoralized ones (Walters, 2010). However, Southeastern Elysium University may benefit more from a demoralized workforce, as GradSolidarity suggests. “Even though workers may have higher rates of absenteeism and lower levels of productivity—it may still be more efficient for management to have workers feel bad about themselves [because] workers may then feel powerless to change the stressful work conditions and powerless to change the way things are organized in the larger society” (Lerner, 1991, p. 51).
GradSolidarity is not the first organization to make such a claim against a university. In protest of low wages, in 1995, Yale graduate teaching assistants organized a grade strike and refused to submit students’ final grades. This grade strike was characterized in popular media with these sentiments GradSolidarity was fighting to dispel. An editorial appeared in a local paper highlighting the story of an Indian graduate teaching assistant who participated in the grade strike, which Watt (1997) paraphrased in his account of the strike. According to Watt, the editorial surmised that the “graduate student who, making $9,940 a year (and getting summers off!), deserves whatever punishment is meted out for refusing to submit final grades, After all… a salary of almost $10,000 is probably some ‘25 times the average annual income in India’ and she should be more grateful” (p. 231). This response is actually similar to some of the public response, especially from university officials, to GradSolidarity’s social media campaigns.

During the ongoing contract negotiations in 2016, a local public media outlet published an article that noted that “GAs are getting a benefit that you can’t put a price on: experience.” The article goes on to offer a quote from one the University’s administrators, paraphrasing the participants’ concerns over institutional culture: “The GTAs here are blessed to be working in jobs that are going to land them their careers later on after they graduate. They need this training… they need us. They’re getting a pretty decent deal here with their compensation, and if they don’t think so, well maybe they just aren’t cut out for this job” (Southeastern Elysium Administrator). This quote illustrates exactly the justification and reasoning that Dylan took issue with in his previous statement about “funny money—the kind that you never see, that you can’t borrow to pay your rent or to buy groceries with if you are hungry.” Bérubé (1997)
argues that “of course [a university] does not ‘pay’ the tuition of any graduate student; it
waives graduate student tuition in return for undercompensated teaching... No money changes
hands in a tuition waiver; the transaction happens entirely in an executive assistant’s software
program, as spreadsheet numbers are fiddled and adjusted... and the notion that universities
‘pay’ their graduate students’ tuition, in other words, is an especially threadbare fiction” (p. 175).

The administration’s position also reveals another key tenet on which the graduate
teaching assistantship is based: the notion that having the “privilege” of serving as an
apprentice holds a value all its own. Young (1995) refers to this as a university ideology that
“graduate teaching assistants function as apprentices whose primary compensation is the
onsite teacher training they receive” (p. 180). She goes on to state that “to this day, faculty and
administrators maintain this fallacy of an antiquated guild system” (p. 180). Watt argues that
no comparison can be made between graduate teaching assistants and apprentices. He states
that in the first place the wage disparity between skilled trades-people and their apprentices is
nothing like the wage disparity between faculty and graduate teaching associates. A tenured
full professor in a humanities faculty at a university may earn $100,000 per year while his or her
graduate teaching assistant earns $10,000. This 10:1 salary ratio is a much wider gap that a
carpenter or plumber apprentice who may earn 40-50% of his or her fully licensed
counterpart’s salary. Additionally, as the apprentice learns additional skills in each year of the
apprenticeship, his or her salary is increased until the apprentice is earning 100% of the salary of
her or his peer colleague. The salaries of graduate teaching assistants are not adjusted in this
way—the entry level wage is often the amount that the graduate teaching assistant is paid
throughout the duration of his or her program, regardless of what new skills or competencies are gained (or what additional workload is required as a result of these new skills). Last, this comparison is void because the job market is not comparable. Apprentices are hired when there is a need in the job market for employees, and apprentices, therefore, have guaranteed employment opportunities once their apprenticeship is complete. Graduate teaching assistants have no such guarantees—in fact, the majority of Ph.D. graduates will have difficulty finding a tenure-track position in the professoriate.

Rather than viewing the graduate teaching assistant as an apprentice, Watt argues, a more comparable metaphor would be to compare graduate teaching assistants to produce workers or miners, who are “knowingly compensated at a level inadequate for many to live on without slipping into debt” (Watt, 1997, p. 244). Since miners lived in company owned houses and shopped in company owned stores, it was possible to them to incur tremendous amounts of debt—so great that they would never be able to leave the company. For graduate teaching assistants, the lackluster promise of future prosperity dulls even more when combined with the reality that in order to receive their training and perform their jobs, they must also shoulder the burden of student loan debt with only a hope of future employment in a bleak job market.

Summary of Theme #2

The categories in Theme #2 show us how graduate teaching assistants struggle to make sense of perceived hierarchies and find their place within them, while helping us to understand how GTAs come to develop their feelings about whether their role is important. Examining
stories, or “urban legends” helps us gauge the topics that are most interesting and perhaps most anxiety provoking for GTAs. Situating GTA stories in the context of their departmental cultural and institutional culture helps provide a thick and rich description through which we can better understand the GTA experiences they have shared with us. Looking at the ways in which GTAs navigate institutional context including the hierarchies and obstacles that create challenges to their progress is critical to understanding the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants.

**Theme #3: Disorienting Dilemmas, Mediating Factors, and Identity Development**

The last theme that emerged from the data pertains to participants’ experience of change in the way they view themselves—indications that their role has created opportunities for transformative experiences. In the following pages, I will evaluate several categories that emerged in the data to describe how each meets the criteria for disorienting dilemmas— the challenging mental junctures where old information is confronted by new information. At the end of Theme #3, I will discuss mediating factors (such as social, institutional, mentoring support) which GTAs reported as instrumental in navigating these disorienting dilemmas. Last, I will discuss ways in which GTA identity development has been influenced by these situations.

**Alienation.** In an upcoming section, I will discuss the ways that peer and social support systems are important to GTAs. However, it is important to note that not all participants reported that their departments actively cultivate such support systems. GTAs (even those in supportive departments) report that they sometimes feel isolated from the product of their
work, engagement with their work, and the potential sense of empowerment that their work
could provide them. Jenna elaborated on the depth of her concern about this experience:

I expected we would be a community of TAs. It was very lonely, very, very lonely in that
department. We were prisoners, and a free labor pool, trapped in a cycle of poverty
and the consequence is that if we try to fight back or organize... the very real fear is that
your position will be taken away and someone else in the waiting line will be given your
job. (Jenna)

Several participants described a similar feeling of isolation, not just from their peers, but also in
terms of isolation from the creative process of teaching.

The experience that Jenna describes in her quote is, in effect, an example of a
phenomenon known as alienation. Alienation is not just social isolation—alienation is
theoretically rooted in the capitalist mode of production. Alienation describes the separation
of people from the product of their labor, the act of production, from their species-being
(humanity), and from other workers. In this situation, the person is no longer valuable as a self-
realized human being, but rather, as an economic entity, measured by his or her surplus value.
Participants seemed very aware of how many aspects of the GTA role parallel the capitalist
model, not only in terms of outcome (reduction of costs and maximization of profits), but also
on the impact this model has on the individuals whose labor is profited from.

Sanjay pointed to attempts to minimize the training required for success in a GTA role.
His supervisor, who he described as “also overworked and underpaid” found herself constantly
running out of time and not being able to fully explain how to grade an assignment or what to
look for to determine what grade a student's paper merited. She became frustrated when a GTA would have to ask for help in responding to a student email because it seemed like “she could just do it faster if she had done it herself.” So, she created rules for when a GTA was “allowed” to contact her, or templates for how to respond to student queries. Sanjay described this as the instructor’s attempt to be helpful and make the job easier on everyone, but explained that it was also frustrating for him because he wanted to understand the process and develop as an instructor himself. He described how the reorganization of labor actually resulted in a deskilling of the workforce: “I’m just an intermediary to the instructor of record. I’m not a person... I’m just a TA... an automaton.”

Sadly, this situation describes a larger phenomenon than just the situation experienced by Sanjay and his peers. According to Lerner (1991), “in almost every sphere of work the tendency of management has been to organize things so that people have less opportunities to use their intelligence and creativity and job tasks become increasingly narrowed” (p. 55). The process of deskilling may seem to increase productivity or efficiency, but there are several other possible consequences as well. First, it creates a situation in which workers can more easily be replaced, and as such, it hampers workers’ ability to bargain collectively for improved wages or working conditions. Second, Lerner (1991) states that “one of the most important consequences of deskilling is what it does to the sense of self-esteem and power that workers have” because “their work gives them no opportunity to use and develop their abilities to think and be creative” (p. 57) that they come away from work believing that they are not capable or not intelligent enough to do so.

In this particular case, Sanjay found this deskilling disappointing, but acknowledged that
his position was still secure and that he appreciated the attempt to make things easier on him. Jenna, however, went on to describe how her position changed, and how her compensation was reduced, (despite being assigned the same number of hours) when the department appointed her for one semester as a “grader” rather than a “teaching assistant.” Her department maintained that less skill was required, and therefore a lower rate of pay was acceptable for her work. Yet, issues of isolation, alienation, deskillng were not the only revelations that concerned GTAs—they also experienced some sense of disorientation as they came to realize that not only their positions, but also some of their embodied demographics, could play a role in their experiences, which is discussed in the depth in the next section.

**The impact of social location and positionality.** Participants in this study were not only aware of how their rank in the academic hierarchy, as well as the value of their labor, influenced their experiences. They were also acutely aware of how their social location and positionality impacted their circumstances. Several participants speculated about how their demographics or appearance might have impacted the way students responded to them in the classroom.

Even something as seemingly innocuous as wardrobe selection varied greatly amongst participants based on demographics. I did not include any questions about wardrobe in my interview protocol, so it was interesting that the topic came up in three of my interviews. Of course, it was not the specific wardrobe choices that interested me, but rather, it was important for me to best understand what the wardrobe symbolized, or how it fit into the broader understanding of the GTA lived experience. The GTAs’ perceptions of how students would react to their choices, or their perception on what was “appropriate” or even “allowed”
for them in their GTA role became a central part of that understanding. For instance, from a male perspective, Sterling commented:

In the first semester I was teaching, I dressed up a bit for the classroom. But I relaxed, I mean, I relaxed an awful lot. I mean, it’s the Southeast for Christ’s sake, you know—it’s hot. So by the second year that I was teaching, I was comfortable. And they were comfortable. And sometimes we would just talk about how I dressed—you know, does this make my ethos suffer? Is my credibility suffering because of how I look? It’s a teaching moment—I try to be the most keeping it real person that they’d ever seen.

(Sterling)

Sterling sounded like he realized that he was able to perform his duties without wearing a professional wardrobe, and from his description of student reactions, he didn’t seem to believe that his decision to do so had any impact on his students’ perception of his work. However, when commenting about clothing choices, Jenna’s female perspective was very different:

For women, TAing seems to have a double whammy. I have brought this up in random workshops that I have done, but I have never once (and I feel absolutely confident being about to say that, I have never once) gone to teach a class in any capacity where I haven’t consciously thought about what I’m wearing. Especially when I was in all of those large 200 person classes where I was on the bottom and I had 200 18 year old guys staring at me from above. I have to be incredibly conscious because people are looking down my shirt all the time. I’m right in front of a projector screen, is what I’m wearing see-through, you know, in that environment? My male colleagues would never once ever think about that. I would ask them about that and we would have
conversations about it, and they would just say things like ‘Oh no, I just wear whatever I’m wearing, like I don’t have to think about those kinds of things.’ Then in my teaching evaluations, I found that it was common for me to get comments about how I was dressed, what my make-up was like, what my hair was like... and whether they were professional or not, male colleagues don’t have that same standard. When I would have conversations about my teaching evaluations with my male superiors, they didn’t understand. I tried to make them understand, you know, I have boobs, I’m objectified on a daily basis. (Jenna)

Jenna was able to show a striking difference in how she might approach her wardrobe selection differently than a male colleague might have to, because she is aware of the social expectations her students, peers, and even faculty supervisors might place on her because of her ascribed status as a woman. Realizing that even her teaching evaluations are affected by her personal appearance was a hard realization, but not the only one that Jenna experienced while working as a GTA. She also noted concerns about ageism:

I am an older TA, but even still, there were times when I would have a student in class who was 50 or 60, and I’m trying to teach, or talk to them about a particular concept, and they’re like “I was in the Vietnam War, you’re not going to tell me what we were fighting for.” I tried to tell them, “Your contribution is valid. Your experiences are worthwhile. Let’s hear about it.” But it is hard when they look at you like you are 12, like a little girl, and they say “you have no life experience.” (Jenna)

Stan discussed difficulties in addressing sexual orientation in the classroom:
...and so, here I am as a gay man of a certain age from another country... you know, there was something that was in the corner of their eye. The first time I taught, I didn’t mention these things, but it felt disingenuous. I was trying to be a real person in front of them, and it took me a little bit of time to find out who the person in front of them was.

(Stan)

While Jenna attributed her concern in her quote to age, and Stan attributed his concern to his sexual orientation, a thorough examination of each quote reveals that several demographics are entering the conversation, although they may seem as secondary, or of little or no importance, from the conscious perspective of the GTA rattling them off. For instance, Jenna specifically refers to her age, but also points out her sex/gender. Stan points out his sexual orientation but causally mentions sex/gender, age, international student status, and duration of teaching experience. Jenna and Stan may not have articulated that more than one demographic category could be impacting their very unique and personal experiences, but they must have realized at some level that those other markers were important or relevant in order to bring them up in this particular context when they had not been explicitly stated in most of the preceding quotes throughout the interview.

At times, participants were more aware of the interplay between their demographics and they outwardly addressed intersectionality—the ways in which social demographics (and the discrimination that may be associated with each category) can actually overlap and create combined and cumulative effects of discrimination, especially for people in marginalized groups. In addition to being inherently aware of intersectionality, GTAs also described the ways in which is becomes difficult to discern why one particular GTA may have very different
experiences from a peer, even working in the exact same assignment with the same mentor and same undergraduate students. Brooklyn provided this example:

You know, I have been thinking about this and I will share it with you. I took my picture down from the online class. One of the other TAs and I had talked about how your demographics might affect your experiences as a TA, like, with the students. I’ve noticed this, and of course there is no merit to it, but our male TAs don’t get questioned as much on their grading. So, when the instructor releases the grades to the students, I will get this string of emails. And, especially when I had my picture up there, I’m very bubbly and friendly, and you know, I look young I guess, so maybe... or maybe it has to do with being black... maybe being a woman. It could be anything, and there is really no way to prove it. We all have implicit biases, but I just also notice that I get more questions from male students. (Brooklyn)

Finding herself in a work situation where, for perhaps the first time, Brooklyn is questioning how her professional experiences are being influenced by her demographics was clearly frustrating for her. Maxima echoed a similar sentiment by saying “I have questions about how students... well even how faculty are treating me. But there’s no one I can ask about it. No one in my department looks like me.” In fact, in looking at all of these quotes, I would summarize that the implicit question that binds them all together is “Can a person like me fit in to a place like this?” This question leads to the next point of discussion regarding career preparation.

**The GTA role and career preparation.** All eight participants were able to reflect about their role as a GTA and how they thought that role might impact future career opportunities. All of the participants noted tangible skills they had gained through their work (enhanced public
speaking skills, people-management skills, time management skills, etc.), yet many described the preparation they were receiving as subpar. Maxima noted frustration with her responsibilities as a GTA.

What I want to know is why are you people making me do this? I want to be a researcher. When I applied for this program, you accepted me because of my excellent record of research. You told me you were going to help me become a top-notch researcher. And how do you do that? You stick me in a classroom. (Maxima)

When I followed up and asked if anyone had talked with her about the importance of her assignment, or about how working as a GTA might advance her opportunities as a researcher, she said quite firmly “teaching takes away from my purpose for being here. Thank God I don’t have to do it next semester.”

Sterling did not share in the view that working as a GTA distracted him from his purpose, although he described his interest in teaching as “minimal.” He noted that he gained many manifest skills from his teaching role, but never learned latent skills, such as how to navigate an academic department: “They treat us like we’re not capable on departmental matters and that [those matters] are not worthy of our interests... it’s disingenuous and off-putting. They’re trying to prepare us for academic positions and they treat us like we’re incapable of understanding them.”

Sterling’s insight is disheartening because again, it illustrates how a department’s intent may produce an unintended impact. The department may have intended to lighten the workload for Sterling and his fellow GTAs. It may have believed that GTAs’ time could be better
spent on other tasks with more tangible outcomes. However, the outcome was not a sense of
gratitude from GTAs. Sterling wanted the opportunity to fully experience academic life, and he
felt that his department’s efforts to shield GTAs from departmental or policy matters prevented
that goal from coming to fruition. Sterling’s intuition about participating in all facets of faculty
life is on par with Colbeck’s (2008) assertions. She states that “faculty and administrators can
also foster integration of doctoral students’ teaching, research, and service identities by
creating cultures in their doctoral programs that elucidate shared meanings across the various
aspects of faculty work” (Colbeck, p. 15). In order to develop fully integrated colleagues in the
professoriate, it is necessary to “introduce students to other faculty roles and responsibilities,
how colleges and universities work, theories of teaching and learning, the demographic
characteristics and lives of undergraduate students, and the like” (Golde, 2008, p. 22).

In looking at GTA responses about perceptions of career preparation, Brooklyn
illustrated an altogether different perspective, but noted that this perspective was only gained
once faculty members in her department made a concerted effort to help her understand how
her role would translate into career preparation:

I have learned that the TA role gives us valuable experience—so even if we don’t decide
to go into academia, I feel like I can take a lot of the teacher training I have received and
apply it to the ‘real world.’ I didn’t realize that at first, but the mentors I worked with
and the pedagogy people in my department helped me realize. (Brooklyn)

Brooklyn’s statement demonstrates Colbeck’s (2008) argument that “finding shared meanings
and integrating all the professional identities involved in faculty work are important to enhance
doctoral students’ productivity, time and energy management, and well-being” (p. 13). She
...a new faculty member educated to become an integrated professional is able to apply research skills to improve his teaching and his students; learning; to derive penetrating questions that advance his research agenda from the thoughtful communication with students; and to define, analyze, and resolve real-world problems in partnership with interdisciplinary colleagues, students, and community members. (Colbeck, p.15)

Brooklyn’s department helped her understand the transferability of the skills she was acquiring, and as such, her perspective shifted from ambivalence toward her role to acceptance and embrace of the challenge of not only the work, but also thinking of ways to utilize her newfound skills.

The shift in perspective that Brooklyn and other GTAs experienced is indicative of a disorienting dilemma. In Chapter 2, I reviewed existing literature in this area, and noted that Mezirow (1991) explains that disorienting dilemmas are likely to lead to what he refers to “transformative learning experiences.” Mezirow (1991) explains that a transformative learning experience happens in response to critical reflection after a life event that triggers a disorienting dilemma, and that while the experience may be disorienting, it is still significant because it offers an individual an opportunity to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information.

I have argued that this theory—specifically the explanation for how transformative learning experiences occur—is incomplete because it offers little insight into the process of “critical reflection.” Golde (2008) argues that “opportunities to explicitly discuss, observe, and
enact the shared values of academic like are rare” and that “few students have or take the opportunity to reflect on why they are doing what they do and what kind of faculty member they want to be” (p. 23). In fact, Nyquist, et al. (1999) found that of student requests for support, one of the highest requests from graduate teaching assistants is having opportunities for “regular and systematic self-reflection... and real intellectual and emotional engagement with others” about their lived experiences as GTAs. When participants in this study mentioned situations that met the criteria for disorienting dilemmas, I followed up with questions about how they had reflected on those experiences, or what resources they used as support to help mediate the experience. Two main categories emerged in their responses: social and structural supports (or lack thereof), and mentoring support (or lack thereof). Both of these categories are discussed below.

The role of peer, social, and institutional support. Participants described the ways in which they sought out support. Through conversation and guided questioning, I learned that participants could summon names of several institutional support structures, such as the Center for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (CITE), the Office of Graduate Support, the graduate student union (GradSolidarity), the Counseling and Wellness Center, etc. Many participants had taken advantage of many of the services offered by these groups (for instance, many spoke about the New GTA Orientation—a CITE event, two participants specifically mentioned going through CITE’s 6-week course “Preparing for College Teaching.” Most had attended some union events, participated in some activities hosted by the Office of Graduate Support, or had visited the Counseling and Wellness Center or at least knew of the services they offered.
However, when asked “when you experience a challenge related to your role as a GTA, are there any institutional supports you might use?” no one responded affirmatively. Participants tended to view these groups in one of two ways. The first perception was that the group did not provide a service that was related to teaching (the union might help with a labor issue but not a classroom issue; the Counseling and Wellness Center would help you cope with personal stressors, but not professional problems, etc.). The second perspective was that the group was helpful for teaching on occasions when the group had initiated an event (this was particularly common in discussing CITE and the Office of Graduate Support), but they felt that for the GTA to call on one of these groups and initiate a conversation carried some negative connotation, as it implied that either they were not able to do their job on their own, or that once they were going “over the department’s head” to resolve a problem. Jordan described these offices as “very serious” and posited that she might contact one of these offices if she were “concerned about her safety with a student” but doubted that they would have the resources or the interest in “helping her grade a paper of a student whose first language was not English.” She went on to state that:

Smaller problems seem like they should be handled internally. Those services seem kind of ominous—it feels like, ‘okay, this is for the big people now... or like, okay, we’re going to the principal’s office now. Using those services... it’s like a last resort, or that’s how it feels at least. I never go there. But I do wish there was a group that was just there to offer me support. I would definitely go. (Jordan)

Sterling responded similarly: “The institution itself does not lend itself support TAs. It’s very autonomous. You know, it’s very like... this is what we expect of you, we’re paying you, we’re
giving you a tuition waiver... so do it and do it right.”

At first glance, these quotes seem to demonstrate that Southeastern Elysium University simply lacks support for graduate teaching assistants. However, given that graduate teaching assistants previously rattled off several departments, offices, and centers for resources and support, it seems that a more complex explanation likely exists for this reality, and it may encompass any or all of the following possibilities: Graduate teaching assistants do not understand how these offices can support someone in their role. Graduate teaching assistants have misperceptions about what each office does and how it could be helpful to them. Graduate teaching assistants have been advised (explicitly or implicitly) not to use the services of these offices. In any of these cases, it is important to recognize that a disparity exists between the institution’s mission of providing support services and the recipients’ (graduate teaching assistants) perception about the availability of such resources.

In the perceived absence of institutional support, many participants described how their peers have served an important support role. Some participants reflected on departmental culture in terms of peer support as well. One participant described the way his department assigned senior peers as mentors to junior or incoming graduate students. Another talked about how his department created a shared office space for the GTAs so that they could have some physical space that allowed them to be “kind of separate from the department, yet integrated with peers and departmental culture, so that they could feel comfortable talking freely and openly their experiences.” These examples provided insights into the ways that departments can cultivate and facilitate meaningful peer support which one participant described as helpful for “academic support, intellectual support, and really... just venting and
reducing stress.” She speculated “I bet that has a lot to do with why people might stay, you know, stick it out and not quit the program.” When I asked participants follow-up questions about specific examples of how they might use their peer or social support systems, they quickly provided stories about times when they were unsure of what action to take, and how peers helped them navigate that uncertainty. Unlike the formal, institutional supports, peer and social support offered an opportunity to reflect on past and future experiences. Brooklyn shared:

Sometimes you’re in a situation where you find yourself struggling with grading a student... maybe you’re questioning your own cultural sensitivity or something... I always seek support from the other TAs in my cohort. I’ll ask them ‘read this paragraph... you know... do you think the ideas are here?’ I say “here’s the grade I gave, like, be honest, do you think it reflects what the paper deserves or would you grade it lighter or harder?’ You know, I am just trying to make sure that I’m not... that it isn’t just my own bias. I ask other people to reflect on it with me. (Brooklyn)

Brooklyn’s quote illustrates the importance of peer support, especially when a GTA is early in the program and looking for a way to gauge the quality of his or her work in a way that doesn’t require a formal assessment of his or her ability. Approaching a mentor (especially a new mentor) may seem too threatening as it may “show evidence” that a GTA is “incapable” of performing a task. On the other hand, approaching a peer may seem less threatening, as a GTA may feel that someone else in their role may be more understanding of their concern. In addition to finding a less threatening way to solve a problem, approaching a peer for guidance may serve a more social function even more valuable than the procedural one: giving and
receiving advice can create a camaraderie and sense of relatedness to ones’ peers. According to Mason (2012), “relatedness is the feeling of being valued and cared for” (p. 260), and she goes on to explain that this is an innate need, that when met, has other positive outcomes such as increased “interest, enjoyment, lower anxiety, fewer grade-focused goals, higher self-regulation, higher course performance, and persistence” (p. 260). Brooklyn’s actions, and the reactions she received, helped her establish this sense of relatedness and connection to a social support network. This demonstrates the value of connection at the departmental level not only with faculty but with other GTAs.

Brooklyn’s quote also illustrates the problem with institution-wide training or support centers. While these kinds of programs may be able to make training equally accessible and may be well-equipped to provide guidance on teaching or pedagogy in general (Smock & Menges, 1985), often times GTAs see their concerns as disciplinary and specific to the material being covered in class. A departmental training program can not only address disciplinary specific concerns, but it also signals to graduate teaching assistants that teaching is important to the department (Smock & Menges, 1985). This discipline-specific approach can be honed even more specifically to a course or a group of graduate teaching assistants when the GTA training is within the department and provided by the instructor assigned to train the GTAs. While this approach can enhance the working relationships between the instructor and the graduate teaching assistants, it can also vary in quality from one semester to the next and from one instructor to the next as the curriculum is solely in the hands of the individual faculty member (Smock & Menges, 1985).
As such, the data from this study revealed that the mentor’s role plays an important part in the support a graduate teaching assistant may receive in the course of his or her program.

**The role of the mentor.** Many stories that emerged during data collection contributed to an understanding of how a GTA may perceive (and then navigate) his or her role. One of the most salient themes that is dispersed through participant stories and interwoven throughout the data pertains to the role of the mentor, and the ways that mentors might shape the GTA’s experiences. Mentors were described differently by participants, but in this data, a commonality shared by all of them is that they were always full-time faculty in the same department as the GTA. Some departments employ a faculty member who specializes in pedagogy, and the GTAs were encouraged to seek support from this individual. Some departments offer a supplemental or required graduate course on pedagogy and the instructor for this course was considered a mentor even after the course concluded. Most GTAs who worked as an assistant in the classroom of another instructor expected that the instructor would serve as their mentor, although their expectations occasionally were met with disappointment. Jordan, for instance, shared her experience: “You asked me about what my best day at work looks like. There was a time I would have said ‘you know, oh I go to my meeting with my mentor and it goes well and we don’t have fights.’ I learned that some people should not be allowed to mentor others.”

Jordan recognized that her mentoring experience was problematic early on, but felt unsure if all mentoring relationships worked this way, or if others might be experiencing the same kinds of challenges she faced. As a new student in the department, she felt uncomfortable expressing her concerns even with peers, until she eventually came to recognize
that her experience was in fact not a typical experience and that others in her department who were working with different mentors did not experience the same kinds of problems she was experiencing. When Jordan and others reported negative mentoring experiences, it became clear that the GTA’s discontent over the mentoring experience resounded not only in how they described their mentoring experiences, but also in their descriptions of their programs and department culture.

Dylan and Brooklyn both responded with generally positive experiences of the mentoring they had received. Their responses exemplify that a good mentoring experience is central in the positive feedback loop in participants’ description of their departmental culture. Dylan noted: “I get support from two people, the instructor that I TAed for and the teaching mentor/pedagogy expert in our department. It was kind of a formal/informal arrangement—it was support that was available for me when I needed it.” Brooklyn also felt that her relationship with a mentor positively affected her view of her program:

The person that taught our pedagogy class really became a mentor to me... well, to my cohort really. You know and it was good because we had developed a rapport with that person in the class that we had together. They were familiar with the syllabi that we had prepared and the classes we were teaching. You know, not only in content but also in delivery and even stylistically with our statements of teaching philosophy and so that person, it wasn’t just some random willy-nilly instructor, you know, that drew your names out of a hat and got stuck with students to mentor. This was a person who was engaged and interested and, you know, actively invested in hoping that we would succeed. (Brooklyn)
To address the significance of his mentor, Sanjay reflected back on the question I had asked earlier on about whether he thought his role was important. Having both positive and negative experiences in the same department made his perspective unique, and he was able to most eloquently elaborate on the connection between his mentoring experiences and his own identity development:

Sometimes I feel like I’m not the best person to ask about this because I had such strange experiences when I first started. Right away I learned where my support is in my department. I had a difficult experience with the first professor I TAed for. I found a lot of support from the pedagogy expert in my department. So, the second professor that I TAed for, I was like, oh okay, this is how these things go. This is what it means to feel important, to feel like my role is important. I found a lot of support from that professor. (Sanjay)

As each of these quotes illustrates, the role of the mentor plays a pivotal role in helping GTAs navigate pedagogical challenges, but also more broadly in helping GTAs understand their role and develop their professional identities in the higher education context. Even departments or programs with stellar curricular materials for GTA development must realize that they are in fact educating graduate students in taught content as well as learned norms, and that “both intended and unintended messages about what is means to be a member of an occupation [are conveyed though] the materials that are selected, the skills that are taught, and the attitudes conveyed by senior members” (Janke & Colbeck, 2008, p. 64). These unintended messages make up the hidden curriculum of a program, department, or institution. The participants in this study revealed that good mentors are instrumental figures in helping their
protégés navigate the manifest curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum or disorienting dilemmas they encounter.

**Summary of Theme #3**

In the literature review in Chapter 2, I have already discussed ways in which graduate school is a process of socialization or resocialization. Anderson and Swazey (1998) note that “graduate school as a socialization process involves divestiture, in the sense of shedding one’s previous self-conception and taking on a new view of the self that reflects one’s role and membership in the new group” (p. 9) and that many students report that graduate school changed them in ways that they do not like (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Unlike previous studies of graduate students in general, the findings in this study which focused on graduate teaching assistants who reported a more positive view of the changes they have experienced in themselves. This finding is significant, and consistent with Lovitts and Nelson’s (2000) AAUP report that indicated that attrition from graduate programs is linked to the type of financial support received. They found, unsurprisingly, that individuals with no financial support had the lowest levels of participation and were most at risk for dropping out of a graduate program. However, the next group with the comparatively greatest risk of withdrawing from a graduate program includes students who are receiving full fellowships. This may come as a shock, given that these students have been awarded the most prestigious and competitive aid package, but those on fellowship are usually not required to teach and are instead given more time to work independently on their individual research endeavors. Since they are not meeting with students, they may not be afforded office space and since they are
not likely participating in teacher training, they may lose access to a valuable mentor as well as opportunities to develop a peer support network.

Graduate teaching assistants, on the other hand, are drawn into a community which ideally offers access to institutional supports and the opportunity for social network building and mentoring. The GTAs’ experiences with alienation, becoming aware of social location and positionality, and experiences with career preparation seemed to meet the criteria set forth in previous literature to be called a “disorienting dilemma,” so it follows that these experiences would provide opportunities for transformation. However, these data reveal that transformative experiences require critical reflection, and this reflection can come from social, structural, and mentoring supports. Gaining insights into how GTAs perceive opportunities for peer, social, and mentoring support (as well as their perceptions of the importance of each) provides us with some understanding of how graduate teaching assistants handle challenges when they arise. These insights also help us realize that when appropriately supported by departments and institutions, the structure of the GTA position is ripe for opportunity for departments to develop and retain outstanding, integrated professionals who excel in all academic endeavors including research, teaching, and service.

Summary

Three themes that emerged in this chapter: (1) GTA perceptions of the GTA role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development. When taken together, these themes
help us understand the challenges associated with the assumption of the graduate teaching assistant role, and offer insights into how these experiences can both help and hinder the progress of GTAs. Looking at the ways in which GTAs perceive their roles, navigate institutional context including the hierarchies, and experience disorienting is critical to understanding the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants.

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work. This research has been guided by the following exploratory questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?

2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature that suggest that, despite the growing need for and use of graduate teaching assistants in higher education settings, GTAs’ experiences are largely unexplored and poorly understood. In Chapter 3, I described the methods that were used to
address the research questions in this study, as well as to describe the participants who took part in the study and the methods used to collect and analyze the data. The purpose of this chapter was to describe the participants (the data source), the relevant data, and the findings that emerged from its analysis, including the three themes which emerged from the data: (1) GTA perceptions of the GTA role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings and situates them in the broader conversation of existing literature, to demonstrate how these data provide answers to the initial research questions.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Study Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work as instructors while pursuing their studies and degrees. This research sought to understand GTAs’ perceptions of their experiences and possible “disorienting dilemmas” to understand possible paths to transformative learning experiences, and to understand interventions that shape these experiences with potentially differential outcomes. This research is significant because graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are becoming increasingly responsible for undergraduate instruction in the landscape of higher education. Their experiences may serve as a pipeline for career readiness and success in faculty positions. Yet, the experiences of graduate teaching assistants have, until now, gone largely unexplored.

Even when job codes or employment titles are the same, the expectations and assigned duties of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) vary widely with diverse expectations from one college to the next, from one department to another, and at times even within a single department. Little data are available to provide insight into typical duties or commonalities between and amongst GTAs. Further, as GTAs occupy these diverse roles, supporting them is imperative to their success. Existent literature offers insights into types of supports that have
been implemented by institutions or training models perceived to be efficient, yet these studies tend to be narrowly focused on specific contexts such as mentoring for minority females in a single natural science department, amongst others (Boice, 1997; Diehl & Simpson, 1989; Weimer, 1990; Wunsch, 1994). As such, these studies have often neglected to address the diverse work that GTAs might be assigned. Consequently, this study has a mandate and imperative to contextualize the data by examining the perceptions of GTAs as they navigate their roles as instructors, and to understand what supports they perceive as available and important to them. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, previous literature suggests a linear process whereby disorienting dilemmas lead to positive transformation through an internal process of critical reflection. The premise of this research project is based on the assumption that disorienting dilemmas may lead to critical reflection which may lead to transformative learning experiences, but that this is only one possible outcome. Existing literature fails to address the possibility of differential outcomes rising from “disorienting dilemmas” which are generally presumed to lead to transformative learning experiences (Cranton & King, 2003). This gap mandates the in-depth exploration of “disorienting dilemmas” that GTAs may perceive that they experience and the role that GTA support systems play in mediating or shaping the outcome of those experiences.

To better understand the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants, this research was driven by four exploratory questions:

1) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?
2) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

3) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

4) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

Review of Methodology

To answer these research questions, the data were collected from three data sources: the primary data source was an interview protocol (Appendix D), which was used to guide my semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews yielded a thick and rich description of “settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104) in order to show diligence in the research process and to provide insights so that the readers may determine the extent to which the findings might be applicable to another setting. When applicable, document analysis also provided insights that enhanced the thick and rich description provided by participant data. Documents were analyzed when they were mentioned as meaningful or important by the participants. Additional documents were collected in order to help me understand departmental and institutional context, such as those posted on the institution or the department’s websites. Last, additional data were collected from my researcher reflexive journal, which proved useful “for recording thoughts, feelings, uncertainties, values, beliefs, and assumptions that surface throughout the research process”
(Carlson, 2010, p. 1104). This process also helped by providing me with a structured opportunity to engage in reflexivity, thereby establishing diligence on the part of the researcher.

Once data was collected, the formal analysis of data began upon the completion of transcription of participant interviews. This process included reviewing and coding the research memos I had been writing in my researcher reflective journal, reviewing documents collected during the research process to triangulate the findings which had emerged from the data, and of course, analysis of the interview data. Data were coded and recoded using both emic and etic approaches (Lett, 1990).

Review of Data

Ultimately, three themes emerged from the data: GTA perceptions of themselves and the value of their role; navigation of hierarchies and challenges for the GTA; and GTA opportunities and the need for support. These themes are described in depth in Chapter 4. Within in each theme, several categories emerged, and these categories support the data described in each of those three particular themes. Excerpts from the data are interwoven into Chapter 4 to exemplify these themes and categories. Analyzed independently, the data in each category are contextualized in relevant literature to support the importance of each category and their relevance to the broader theme.

With literally hundreds of pages of coded data to draw from, it became necessary to determine which data would be most useful for presentation in this study, and which data
would have to remain unused at this time. Strict attention was paid to the purpose of this study, and the data presented will illustrate only those findings most relevant to the research questions. To that end, data were thematically organized based on how they provided insights into the research questions guiding the study. The following table illustrates how the thematic organization of data helped to provide insights into each research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Themes and Their Insights Into Research Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
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| Theme #1: GTA perceptions of the value of their role | • What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?  
• How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role? |
| Theme #2: navigating institutional context-hierarchies, obstacles, and support | • How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?  
• What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants? |
| Theme #3: disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development | • To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?  
• What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants? |

In order to contextualize these findings, the remainder of Chapter 5 is intended to situate the three major themes into their respective bodies of literature. This includes the
discussion of major findings, their significance, and their relevance to existing literature, including those findings which add novel or contradictory perspectives to past and contemporary research. In order to achieve this goal, this chapter will discuss the data which were analyzed in Chapter 4. These data are then used to situate the micro-level and macro-level GTA experiences and outcomes from the three major themes into the existing literature of transformative learning. In doing so, this study demonstrates the extent to which GTA experiences are illustrative of disorienting dilemmas, and evaluates the contexts and degree to which transformation takes place. This chapter also draws on my use of the researcher reflective journal, as I incorporate my own positionality and experience with the research process and findings into this discussion. The chapter ends with conclusions, including implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Disorienting Dilemmas

The term “disorienting dilemma” has been used to describe a life event such as a marriage or divorce, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one, that causes a person to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information (Mezirow, 1991). What these types of events have in common is that they create a mental juncture where old information is challenged by new information, and this creates a mental rift in which an individual must confront the cognitive dissonance that ensues.

Previous studies examined the kinds of disorienting dilemmas that confront other populations in education, such as new teachers or incoming graduate students (Cho, Kim,
Svincki, & Deckey, 2011), but these studies fail to account for the additional obstacles or challenges faced by graduate teaching assistants. Because it is important to acknowledge that graduate teaching assistants operate under a different reality than other groups, it is questionable whether related literature that stems from research about existing (or even new) faculty or graduate students in general may be broadly applied to what one might expect graduate teaching assistants should experience. Like other contingent faculty, graduate teaching assistants do not have the comfort or protection of a guaranteed continuing contract for employment. Unlike faculty though, this group is made of students who are dependent upon the university for benefits such as stipends, tuition waivers, and eventual receipt of a credential as well as latent benefits such as validation or future letters of recommendation. As such, working as a graduate teaching assistant is a “high stakes” endeavor with unique role attributes and thus requires special attention. A review of existing literature suggests that the stress and anxiety that can accompany the GTA position, along with the variety of new roles and expectations, may create the perfect environment for disorienting dilemmas to occur.

The findings from this study reveal that the experiences of graduate teaching assistants are in fact unique from experiences reported in previous research regarding other populations. Further, analysis of data revealed that these experiences do meet the criteria to designate them as disorienting dilemmas based on descriptions of disorienting dilemmas in extant literature. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the findings from the data that demonstrate ways in which these disorienting dilemmas happen at both the micro-level and macro-level of GTA experiences. In other words, this discussion will include the GTAs’ micro-level experiences with their own perception of self and identity, individual-level experiences with other peers and
colleagues, as well as the macro-level experiences, including broader interactions with departments and the larger institutional context. The terms “micro” and “macro” are in no way intended to describe the scope or relative importance of these events—rather, they will help differentiate between small scale interactions versus larger scale social processes or organizational structures. While the separation of micro and macro-level experiences is somewhat disingenuous (micro and macro-level experiences do not take place in isolation from one another), it is still important to view them as separate for the purpose of discussion since the outcomes of these experiences require an understanding of both individual agency and institutional structures. These micro and macro-level experiences will be discussed in light of the analysis that has been presented in Chapter 4.

**Micro-Level Experiences as Disorienting Dilemmas**

The analysis of data revealed that challenging situations often arise for graduate teaching assistants, and these situations cause them to evaluate their existing knowledge about themselves and their perceptions of the GTA role. These situations, therefore, create a micro-level disorienting dilemma wherein GTAs must confront dissonance between their previous perceptions, their sense of self-worth and importance, and their perception of their own value within their departmental and institutional contexts. In interviews with graduate teaching assistants, it became clear that they struggled to address whether they felt valued—while they often reported “doing valuable work,” they typically felt unrecognized by their departments and by the institution. This challenge was exacerbated as GTAs defined their value both through their feelings of importance and through their compensation, thus confounding their
perceptions about their intrinsic worth with descriptions of their value from a labor and compensation perspective. Although part of that issue stems from macro-level departmental and institutional policies, it is important to consider the micro-level situations that may have created participants’ descriptions of feeling overworked and undercompensated. These feelings were intertwined with GTAs’ perceptions of the importance of their role in the greater institutional and broader academic contexts, and they caused the participants in this study to question the value of the contributions they were making. These intermittent feelings of importance and unworthiness contributed to disorientating dilemmas for GTAs as they struggled to make sense of new information which often conflicted with their previous perceptions about their role.

This finding makes sense in the context of broader literature about graduate student experiences generally. Egan (1989) argued that “many may enter graduate school with the belief that it will be a continuation of the educational/developmental socialization process they have experienced already” (p. 202). She went on to state that graduate students are “likely to anticipate a supportive atmosphere... yet the structure they encounter may not match these expectations” (p. 202). We know that these and other factors have a detrimental impact on graduate student success. In fact, Anderson and Swazey (1998) argued that the graduate student transition is so confusing and challenging that “substantial percentages of our respondents were always or usually bothered by role conflict: About a quarter thought they could not satisfy conflicting demands of various people, over a third thought that the amount of work they had to do interfered with how well they did it, over 40 percent felt that their work interfered with their personal life, and over a third found evaluating their own progress
difficult” (p. 8). In their 2006 publication, Nesheim, et al. summarized several works that looked at doctoral program completion, and indicated “that attrition rates for doctoral students in all fields hover at about 50 percent” (p. 6). Nettles and Millett confirmed that this exact rate of attrition has persisted in their work from 2006.

It is important to point out that all of the above studies looked at graduate student experiences. None added (or teased out) in the additional expectations, role conflicts, or challenges that may lead to transitional difficulties, challenges to perseverance, or withdrawal from one’s program for those graduate students specifically appointed as graduate teaching assistants. Those few studies that have examined experiences of graduate teaching assistants have asserted that those GTAs who experience role conflict feel that the priority of the graduate degree creates a conflict with their role as teachers (Worthen, 1992), that some GTAs regard the position itself as “evidence of institutional ambivalence toward teaching” because it demonstrates the institution’s position that faculty can better spend their time doing research (Boehrer & Sarkisian, 1985, p. 10), and that the experience of serving as a graduate teaching assistant creates frustration and uncertainty, mainly due to a lack of information and preparation to take on these roles (Worthen, 1992).

Another area of micro-level disorientation manifested in interviews as many of the GTAs who participated in this study seemed to struggle with thoughts about the impact of their social location or positionality. Their comments suggested that they were surprised that in an institution of higher education which professed to value diversity and boasted a diverse student and faculty population, their identities or demographics still played a role in their interactions and experiences. Thinking about race, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, and even
outward appearance in terms of wardrobe selection became a point of internal strife for many GTAs in this study. These graduate teaching assistants have successfully avoided or risen through challenges associated with their identities in past educational experiences, as is evidenced by their admission into their respective graduate programs and GTA positions. Even for those GTAs who do not plan to work in academia, their identities are largely integrated with their academic experiences: they see themselves as students, and they are beginning to see themselves as researchers, teachers, scholars, colleagues. Yet, when they feel that identifying factors (such as race, sex, and others like those mentioned above) are negatively impacting their experiences, they begin to question whether “a person like them” fits into “an environment like this.”

The disorientation described here extends beyond the challenges of developing and accepting a professional identity—it looks at the challenges associated with the experience of questioning one’s viability in her or his desired program as a result of identity. Previous research has demonstrated that “student experiences at the earliest stage [of the graduate school experience] are likely to have a strong influence on personal development and persistence in year two and beyond” (Sweitzer, 2008, p.44), and that their “educational contexts shape the nature of their professional identities as integrated or fragmented” (Colbeck, 2008, p. 10), but this previous research falls short. Gardener (2008) noted that “for underrepresented students the experience of graduate education and its normative socialization patterns may not fit their lifestyle and the diversity of their backgrounds, making them feel they do not ‘fit the mold,’ and putting them at a higher risk for departing from the program entirely (p. 135). Challenges associated with social location or positionality, especially
when confronted with this concern unexpectedly, creates a disorienting dilemma as graduate teaching assistants evaluate their existing preconceptions about their role in the academy and use their GTA experiences with students, peers, and faculty to understand and reevaluate their previous beliefs about themselves and their role.

Data analysis in Chapter 4 revealed another surprising area in which disorienting dilemmas often occur at the micro-level of GTA experience, and this pertained to interaction (or at times, a lack thereof) with their graduate teaching assistant colleagues. At times when GTAs needed support, many of those who I interviewed expressed ambivalence or misperceptions about the availability of institutional support. Especially in those instances when GTAs reported that institutional or departmental support was perceived to be lacking, these participants described how their peers have served an important support role. Those who found support in colleagues reported that fellow and senior GTAs were able to support them in most of their various roles: as a student, a teacher, and with social support and camaraderie.

As mentioned in the data analysis of Chapter 4, some participants reflected on departmental culture in terms of peer support as well. One participant described the way his department assigned senior peers as mentors to junior or incoming graduate students. Another talked about how his department created a shared office space for the GTAs so that they could have some physical space that allowed them to be “kind of separate from the department, yet integrated with peers and departmental culture, so that they could feel comfortable talking freely and openly their experiences.” In other words, a positive peer culture of support offered a “safe space” in which to process some of the challenges and disorientation GTAs were experiencing. This was especially true in cases where graduate
teaching experiences felt that they were sharing a disorienting dilemma. One participant found support from other GTAs, all of whom felt that their department was discouraging them from spending time or energy on their teaching assignments. The participant described the ways that they were able to come together to discuss teaching issues out of the earshot of the department, and ultimately described the development of this informal arrangement as “important discussion and sharing about their work—essentially, an underground railroad of teaching.” However, participant reports of peer culture were certainly not all positive, and data analysis revealed that negative peer culture is not only unhelpful—it actually creates a disorienting dilemma of its own.

Many GTAs reported that they expected to find themselves in a community of scholars, with colleagues and peers offering supports, insights, and guidance through the course of their professional development. Instead, several GTAs described their experiences as fraught with issues of isolation, alienation, deskilling, and degradation. It is important to note that there are both micro and macro-level components to alienation and isolation because in some cases, this individual’s experience may be the result of departmental or institutional culture. As a result, this finding will be included in both the micro and macro-level areas of discussion. In this section I will focus on the concern that many GTAs expressed about being isolated from peers. In the macro-level discussion I will refer to alienation again in an effort to discuss the structural foundations of departmental or institutional contexts which may have created these experiences for GTAs who reported it.

All of the participants in this study noted that they experienced isolation or alienation at least occasionally. However, several GTAs noted that this feeling was consistent and indicated
that it created an environment that was not conducive to their work. There were several explanations offered about why isolation occurred, and some were not surprising: people get busy with their own work, people are contending with different mentors, major professors, classes, etc., and therefore are balancing different expectations, workloads, and obligations. Other reasons given were more surprising to me, however, as they were associated with negative feelings toward peers, or more commonly, toward departments. These sentiments were not the kind one might expect to hear about if an individual is at odds with another individual he or she finds to be disagreeable—these are the kinds of sentiments that indicate that some individuals are feeling entirely unable to access other people when support is needed and that they feel completely separated from the product of their work, engagement with their work, and the potential sense of empowerment that their work could provide them.

Lerner’s (1991) view suggested that this isolation is a reflection of other facets of our society; for instance, in school “our feelings were systematically ignored and discounted, while we were increasingly trained to see ourselves as deserving to be in whatever part of the [economic] class structure we were being trained to fit into (p. 189), and at work we are trained to believe that our opportunities for success or our times of failure are entirely based on our own merits or lack thereof. Lerner suggested that the outcome of this consistent, irrational self-blame is “an individual increasingly isolated from other human beings and increasingly afraid to make deep and real contact” (p. 189). He went on to say that this distancing from others encroaches on us so that:

every aspect of our lives is governed by this distrust and its resultant isolation. We can’t stand up to the boss because we know that we will be alone in doing so. We won’t
speak up at union meetings because we don’t want to call attention to ourselves. We are certainly not going to call for militant action through our unions when we know that workers throughout society will view us as selfish, and will go about their own selfish interests without giving us the support we need to win our struggles. (p. 190)

We distance ourselves from others and we realize that others are distancing from us. The sense of self-blame that manifests in our daily lives confirms for us that we are failing and causing others to back away from us—the irony is that none of us are able to see outside of our own purviews and unable to see the broader set of social constraints that “shapes each individual perception according to our shared understanding of isolation and powerlessness” (p. 190). Imagine the amplification of this problem in the given context: graduate students enter a total institution, they are regularly judged based on their intellectual merit by superior intellectuals they aim to impress... and for graduate teaching assistants, this comes at the same time that they are entering a profession with little preparation, high expectations, and at times, a great deal of competition for the position they hold. There is no wonder, then, that this degree of alienation or isolation would create disorientation.

Each of the areas described above have been termed “micro-level” experiences because they largely pertain to individuals’ small-scale interactions with other individuals or small groups. It is important to evaluate these experiences in the broader departmental and institutional contexts. For instance, participants’ descriptions of feeling overworked and undercompensated were intertwined with their perceptions of the importance of their role within the greater organization. To fully understand the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants, exploring how GTAs understand and navigate these larger scale social processes or
organizational structures will shed light on the “macro-level” experiences that may create disorienting dilemmas for them. The macro-level experiences that emerged from data analysis are described below.

**Macro-Level Experiences as Disorienting Dilemmas**

In addition to the small-scale interactions with other individuals or small groups that contributed to disorienting dilemmas for graduate teaching assistants, their understandings and navigation of larger scale social processes or organizational structures also created “macro-level” experiences that, for some, led to confrontation with disorienting dilemmas. Many of these experiences were analyzed in the second and third themes in Chapter 4, and the implications for these experiences are discussed below.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that graduate teaching assistants in this study reported confusion over the value of their roles, and looking at existing literature revealed several possible contributing factors for this confusion—one of which is that the experience of serving as a graduate teaching assistant creates frustration and uncertainty, in part due to a lack of information and preparation to take on these roles (Worthen, 1992). It is important to revisit this lack of information not only within the context of an individuals’ inability to find the information he is she needs to be successful, but to also look at this as a problematic part of larger scale social processes or organizational structures.

The lack of information available to incoming graduate students and graduate teaching assistants is partly an issue that stems from the important tenets on which American higher
education is built: academic freedom and faculty governance. Faculty governance “ensures that faculty members participate in the main educational decisions of their institution” (Schrecker, 2011, p. 24). As a result, “in those areas that are central to the faculty’s concerns—teaching and research and the personnel decisions related to them—its members must have a major voice” (p. 32) decisions are made at the local level and the resultant outcomes are not always consistent, transparent, or publicly available. While I am certainly not advocating for the elimination of these foundational aspects of the professoriate, I do wish to point out that what often results from these collegial-managerial arrangements is that the level of decision making regarding the experiences for graduate students or the expectation for graduate teaching assistants falls on individual departments (and often, just a committee or subset of faculty within a department). These individuals use their disciplinary expertise and expression of academic freedom to determine the best path for their students and graduate teaching assistants employed as their personnel, and thus a great deal of inconsistency may be seen between departments at a single institution and within the same discipline at different institutions.

While it could be argued that this inconsistency and lack of information available is simply an unfortunate byproduct of this largely superior system of shared governance, Lerner (1991) might have argued instead that this system allows for strategies of control, particularly over graduate teaching assistants who are often responsible for a large proportion of departmental work. As institutions of higher education have become more corporate-like in their focus to minimize costs and externalize expenses through acquisition of resources and grants, the structure has become increasingly bureaucratic. Lerner explained that
bureaucratization is “wonderful for mystifying the basic power relationships at work” (p. 61) and for individualizing the expectations for success at the level of each individual employee, in effect justifying inconsistent treatment of people with similar job descriptions. Ross (1997) succinctly stated that “academic work becomes labor only when the morality of employment is called into question... academic business as usual depends on concealing or mystifying these labor conditions” (p. 140).

Data analysis revealed that graduate teaching assistants do, in fact, encounter unwritten but culturally enforced hierarchies in academia in both departmental and institutional contexts. The content of their interview responses suggested that they struggle to make sense of these perceived hierarchies, and that once they became aware of their relatively low position in the hierarchy, these participants found it challenging to accept “their place” within it. Because these experiences pertain to formal and informal structures and organizations within the institution, they have been labeled as “macro-level” experiences, although it is imperative to acknowledge the connection between one’s perception of low rank on an institutional hierarchy and one’s feelings about their value and the importance of their role. The structure that GTAs must navigate in their departments and institution provides the contextual lens through which GTAs view and interpret their experiences.

Schrecker (2011) described the way that these hierarchies persist in socioeconomic terms: “At the top are football coaches with seven-figure salaries and university presidents with high six-figure ones. Professional academics at somewhat less rarified levels, from full professors with named chairs and independent research centers down to part-time instructors and graduate student teaching assistants, operate within a carefully calibrated set of
hierarchies and privileges” (p. 157). Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) suggested that this perception extends beyond salaries and economic worth. They coined the term “hierarchical microaggressions” to describe the “everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person in the institution” (p. 62). As discussed in the second theme in Chapter 4, navigating these institutional hierarchies and trying to make sense of the perceived microaggressions they encountered created a feeling of disorientation for many graduate teaching assistants.

In addition to these everyday slights or minor offenses encountered in interactions with others, the hierarchy encountered by these participants was experienced in other ways as well. The research of Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) suggested that systemic hierarchies are enforced through the perpetuation of microaggressions in both interpersonal interactions as well as through departmental and institutional policies that clearly favor positions (and the individuals holding those positions) at the top of the hierarchy. From the data in this study, for example, one participant’s department created a directory which first listed the department administration, followed by the faculty by rank from most to least prestigious. The directory then listed doctoral fellows, then doctoral level research assistants, and then doctoral teaching assistants. Last on the directory were master’s level research assistants, and finally teaching assistants. Unfunded full and part-time graduate students were not even included on the list. Adjunct faculty members and departmental staff were also omitted. Other tangible differences in treatment were dictated by policy, and these policies varied by department.
At times departmental or institutional policies were intended to create opportunities for faculty which were not available for students. In other cases, policies were intended to provide additional privileges to graduate students with more prestigious assignments, or advanced graduate students while denying those opportunities to graduate students with lower ranking assignments (or no assignments at all). One department had a policy that granted doctoral students access to the copy machine while master’s students did not get copying privileges. The participant who noted this difference could not explain why such a policy might exist given that in this particular department, all graduate teaching assistants had similar work assignments. A common policy noted by many participants was in relation to summer funding: doctoral level graduate teaching assistants were often given priority access to scarce summer funding opportunities without regard to performance evaluation or progression through the program and timely completion of benchmarks. The GTA perception of meritocracy at times conflicted with departmental policies or unwritten practices that instead seemed to offer benefits based on status or other more seemingly equitable measures.

Other policies regarded the use of space: doctoral level students having keys to the main office, having private offices, or having separate lounge areas that were restricted from master’s student use. This was also the case where graduate teaching assistants reported their graduate research assistant counterparts having access to better research space, labs, and other amenities that facilitated enhanced success in their own graduate program (not only in their research assignment). In order to better relay the frustration that surfaced in interviews, I will provide a hypothetical example which captures the sentiment of one participant without divulging information that might identify her department: Imagine being a chemistry graduate
student. If you are a teaching assistant you may have access to a classroom where you perform
your assigned duties. However, if you are a research assistant, you may have unrestricted
access to a state-of-the-art lab where you perform your assigned duties. If both of these
graduate students are required to do independent lab research as part of their formal studies, it
stands to reason that the graduate teaching assistants would perceive a disadvantage if some
of their cohort members have unparalleled access to the facilities in which their independent
research can be conducted. While this particular example did not emerge in the data, this is
representative of the kind of complaint I heard: access to departmental goods and resources is
contingent on one’s position and rank within the departmental hierarchy.

The constant enforcement of hierarchies through the use of hierarchical
microaggressions is one way in which departmental culture is conveyed. Bergquist and Pawlak
(2008) suggested that culture, when applied to an academic institution or department, should
be defined as providing “meaning and context for a specific group of people” and which “holds
people together and instills in them an individual and collective sense of purpose and
continuity” (pp. 9-10). They went on to state, though, that the culture “defines the nature of
the reality for those people who are part of the culture… and provides lenses through which
members interpret and assign value” (p. 10) to products as well as roles and positions, people
and their ideas. Departmental culture generates the structural context in which organizational
climate is measured.

Departmental culture can also be observed in other ways as well, and it is important to
note that even in departments where hierarchical microaggressions can be found, it is not
indicative that the entire culture of the department exists to challenge or impose unnecessary
obstacles on its graduate teaching assistants. Very seldom in social life are situations so clearly defined. Even within this study, participants would talk about the duality of their departments—suggesting that creating shared space was an attempt to create a positive, supportive environment and simultaneously acknowledging that their departments created hostility by using their funding as a “carrot” and a constant reminder that other graduate students were waiting in the wings to take the place of a GTA with the slightest misstep.

On the other hand, several examples of positive departmental culture for graduate teaching assistants in this study included having access to faculty mentors (even when they were no longer assigned as supervisors), feeling able to talk openly with faculty members about professional or personal problems encountered during the course of their role as graduate teaching assistants, feeling that their opinion is important in the governance and policy-making in the department, and being acknowledged for the work that they do to support departmental efforts.

The departmental culture conveys both manifest and latent messages about the importance of various aspects of the department’s work, including research and teaching, and the people who are responsible for doing this work, including graduate teaching assistants. Some of these messages are communicated by formal policies (such as those mentioned above), through program literature such as information provided in graduate student or graduate teaching assistant manuals, materials posted on the departmental websites or social media accounts, etc. These messages are part of the formal, or manifest curriculum of the department.
Other messages communicated by departments may not be conveyed in policy or publications. Instead, they may be communicated through actions or implications, such as awarding grants or recognitions for outstanding research endeavors but not teaching endeavors, or by subtle comments or “helpful” suggestions from faculty mentors or departmental administrators that minimize the importance of teaching but emphasize the value of research. These informally communicated lessons are known as the hidden curriculum, a term that Jackson (1968) used to denote the norms and values that are implicitly taught in schools but not addressed in the teachers’ formal curriculum or lesson plans, nor are the explicitly communicated in any statement of learning outcomes or goals. Moreover, Janke and Colbeck (2008) contended that even though the “messages are often transmitted and received unconsciously by instructors and students… the lessons learned from the hidden curriculum may last longer that any learned from the intended curriculum” (p. 59). When the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum do not match up, the mixed messages create a sense of confusion and disorientation as students struggle to make sense of the department’s expectations and standards against which they will be evaluated.

Nyquist, et al.’s (1999) article “On the road to becoming a professor” offers insights into the consequences of the confusing and mixed messages in the graduate student experience:

Contributeing to graduate students’ confusion—and in some cases, to their rejection of the academy’s values—are the mixed messages they receive on every front. Of course, one of the reasons it is so difficult for them to demystify these messages is that the academy is never a truly unified entity... and participants [in their study] report that
there seems to be a “secret model” of graduate education with implicit norms and rules that may differ from the explicit messages they receive.” (p. 23).

Further, it is important to note that these mixed messages are inherent from the beginning of the experiences of GTAs such as those who participated in this study. Because I sought to understand the experiences of graduate teaching assistants in a research university, their role’s emphasis on teaching automatically designated them to a lower position on the hierarchy sending a mixed message about their value to the institution. Boyer noted that this situation can be “exacerbated when the most accomplished graduate students are given research assistantships—and rewarded by not having to teach” (p. 71). What is challenging is that these messages are often inconsistent even within departments, and often even when coming from the same source. For instance, a faculty supervisor may praise the work of graduate teaching assistants when they lead a successful in-class discussion, but also criticize their ability to teach due to a lack of disciplinary knowledge since their research agenda is not yet robust. A department might offer a certificate as an award for outstanding teaching, but offer a scholarship for outstanding research. In both cases, the rhetoric suggests that teaching is valued but the actions provide inconsistent and confusing mixed messages.

GTAs such as Jordan referred to her departmental culture as privileging research over teaching. As Jordan’s passion was for teaching, she felt that her goal created a distance between her and the faculty members in her department, and singed her out as being different from the research-oriented graduate students in the department. As her goals were not equally supported, she found herself unable to develop a stronger camaraderie with her peers.
who subscribed to the department’s values, even though she and her peers were all assigned as graduate teaching assistants with similar work responsibilities.

Although Sanjay reported that he believed his supervisor was trying to be helpful when she eliminated autonomy from the GTA position by asking graduate teaching assistants to follow strict templates for interacting with students or assigning grades, he also noted that her attempt to make GTAs’ lives easier resulted in their inability to learn or develop their own teaching skills. Sanjay also pointed out an interesting, implicit recognition of the department’s culture when he described his supervisor as having a heavy teaching load and being “overworked and underpaid.” Sanjay’s belief about his supervisor’s workload and compensation was developed in the context of his departmental culture. He observed that her workload was higher than that of others, and that her compensation was not enough for the amount of work she was assigned. He learned that his department did not value teaching activities, even amongst their faculty.

Consequently, the hidden curriculum in a department can impact and can be impacted by departmental culture. In other words, the culture of the department can have an impact on the unintended messages which are provided to graduate teaching assistants. Similarly, the unintended messages which are provided to graduate teaching assistants can impact their perception of the departmental culture. In looking at micro-level GTA experiences, I discussed the ways in which feelings of alienation or isolation can be understood as a result of the interactions (or lack thereof) with other individuals or social groups. However, because peer interaction was such a prominent theme in the data, it is important to look at peer interactions,
as well as alienation and isolation as a function of departmental culture and possible symptom or consequence of the hidden curriculum of the department.

I previously discussed the micro-level experience of alienation and isolation as well as the deskilling and degradation that several graduate teaching assistants mentioned in depth during my interviews. I noted also that there are both micro and macro-level components to alienation and isolation and in the earlier section I focused on the concern that many GTAs expressed about being isolated from peers and the impact that had on their individual and small-group social interactions. However, the micro/macro connection in this case links the individual’s experience with the broader context to help us understand how those micro-level experiences may be the result of departmental or institutional culture. In this section of the discussion I will refer to alienation again in an effort to discuss the structural foundations of departmental or institutional contexts which may have contributed to these experiences for GTAs who reported it.

Several GTAs referred to actions in their departments as a cause for the isolation they felt. Jenna, for instance, noted that in her experience, if she “rocked the boat” or complained about her working conditions, there was a very real fear that her position could be taken from her and given to someone else. Some departments admitted an equal or greater number of unfunded full-time students as those who were offered funding. In these departments, it seemed that tensions between graduate students were greater because the “ready and willing” labor pool posed a constant threat of job security. However, even in departments that admitted only funded students, tensions were still present pertaining to how positions were assigned, how students were selected for elite opportunities, distribution of time and space,
etc. Dylan and Stan specifically mentioned the use of “carrots” in their interviews, and other GTAs noted experiences (or the fear of possible future experiences) that result from department and faculty power. This fear is not without merit—Wilson and Stearns (1985) remind us that “however benign, downplayed, or egalitarian this relationship [between a member of the faculty and a GTA] may seem, the two people in it are also involved in another, more encompassing and consequential relationship—that of professor and graduate student” (p. 36). As such, Wilson and Stearns continue, “from the interplay of tacit autonomy and reserved authority emerges a subtle control, communicated by signals rather than by direct messages” (p. 36). The lack of direct messages, inadequate or inconsistent information, and the tenuous relationship between the GTA and the faculty members in her or his department can cause tremendous anxiety, concern, and disorientation. To the extent that departments contribute to these issues (the privileging of certain types of goals over other, ability and implicit or explicit threat of departments to stop a GTA’s funding or provide a more or a less desirable assignment, etc.) the alienation and isolation perceived for those individuals can be viewed as a macro-level experience.

Because of the importance of this point, it is worth noting again: departments do not typically fall on one of two dichotomous points (good or bad, supportive or unsupportive, helpful or hurtful, etc.) Rather, the findings in this study indicate that departments are likely to have a variety of qualities, some of which are helpful to students and others which impose unnecessary obstacles. It is not likely that these qualities were implemented purposefully, and it is quite possible that many people who participate in them have no idea that they are doing so. In Chapter 4, I discussed the institutional culture when I revealed data that indicated that
graduate students, through their union representation, expressed frustration over their working conditions and administrators typically met these concerns with minimization or worse, disdain. It seemed that most the institutional culture, then, would create a hostile work environment generally for graduate teaching assistants. Yet, GTAs in this study reported a lack of connection with the institution. Because of the insular and siloed nature of departments within an institution, the departmental culture may or may not match the institutional culture, and several participants in this study reported ways that their departments defied institutional culture (such as providing work space, assigning senior GTAs as peer advisors and assigning faculty mentors to offer support. They discussed times when individual faculty members “went to bat” for them or helped them achieve a goal, or times when the department did recognize their achievements. The data in this study indicated that departments could learn to offer more in the way of supporting graduate teaching assistants, but the important take home message here is that even within an unsupportive institutional culture, GTAs feel their connection to their departments rather than their institutions, so departments can play a major role in shaping GTA experiences and outcomes.

These macro-level experiences described in my interviews show us how graduate teaching assistants struggle to make sense of perceived hierarchies and find their place within them, while helping us to understand how GTAs come to develop their feelings about whether their role as a graduate teaching assistant (or the work of teaching broadly) is important. Situating GTA stories in the context of their departmental cultural and institutional culture helps provide a thick and rich description through which we can better understand the GTA experiences they have shared with us. Looking at the ways in which GTAs navigate institutional
context including the hierarchies and obstacles that create challenges to their progress is critical to understanding the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants.

Describing these micro-level and macro-level experiences in light of the existing literature and conceptualization of disorienting dilemmas reveals that the experiences of GTAs are unique from previously studies populations and that these experiences do fit the criteria for disorienting dilemmas in both their interactions with other individuals and small groups as well as with their experiences navigating departmental and institutional organizational structures within their roles as graduate teaching assistants. Previous research has contended that disorienting dilemmas result in transformative learning experiences as individuals evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information (Mezirow, 1991) based on the challenging situations they encounter. As the data from this study revealed that GTAs experience disorienting dilemmas, it becomes important to understand the extent to which participants felt that these situations have resulted in transformative learning experiences for them.

**Transformative Learning Experiences**

The body of literature that describes transformative learning theory offers a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience (Mezirow, 1991). Stemming from transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1991) explained that a transformative learning experience happens in response to critical reflection after a life event that triggers a disorienting dilemma. While
disorienting, these experiences offer an individual the opportunity to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information. A transformative learning experience alters the way that a person perceives his or her self in a social context. This new perception is incorporated into the person’s personality and identity. Analysis of data in this study reveals that graduate teaching assistants do experience disorienting dilemmas, so it is now relevant to evaluate and discuss these findings in the context of transformative learning theory.

The literature review in Chapter 2 offers a thorough summary of transformative learning experiences. In sum, the literature suggests that learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience (Mezirow, 1991) when they encounter new, contradictory information that challenges their old system of beliefs. Mezirow (1991) explained that a transformative learning experience happens in response to critical reflection after a life event that triggers a disorienting dilemma. While disorienting, these experiences offer an individual an opportunity to evaluate their existing knowledge and to make changes to accommodate new information. By evaluating the data analyzed in Chapter 4, I suggest that we can find evidence of positive transformative learning experiences, which I will discuss below. I will go on, however, to discuss the next major finding of this study: that other possible outcomes of disorienting dilemmas exist, which lead me to propose that transformative learning experiences may not always lead to the incorporation of new information or positive change for the individual who experiences the disorienting dilemma.

Some questions in the interview schedule asked participants to reflect on whether they have experienced a change in how they think about themselves. These questions were
intended to solicit responses that might indicate whether these graduate teaching assistants had undergone transformative learning experiences. None of the eight participants in this study asserted that they had not changed at all. Quite the contrary, graduate teaching assistants were able to discuss significant changes in the way they view themselves since taking on the role of GTA.

**Positive Outcomes from Transformative Learning Experiences**

As expected based on extant literature, many of their stories reflected personal and professional growth, deeper understandings of the organization and the profession, and increased awareness of their selves and the contributions they were making in their fields. Bucher and Stelling (1977) defined professional identity as “the perception of oneself as a professional and as a particular type of professional” (p. 213). Since their seminal work, the body of literature on professional identity has grown, and descriptions typically encompass values, beliefs, behaviors, and other attributes that are commonly associated with a particular role, which help individuals identify themselves as fitting into that role and seeing others who do not possess those attributes as not belonging (Shein, 1978; Sweitzer, 2008). In describing the ways in which they had changed, GTAs were noting instances of values, beliefs, behaviors, or attributes that made them feel that they were becoming part of the profession: that they were developing their professional identities. Stan responded with how he has developed skills that he thinks makes him better in his work:
When I first started teaching, sometimes I would make mistakes and so that would cause more work for me or I would assign an assignment that would then take too long for me to grade that I couldn’t, you know, if I’m judging my time being what I’m paid for, what I should be doing, even though it was a great assignment, it was, it was too tedious and time consuming to want to deal with. And so as I got further along past the first couple of years as instructor of record, I learned to kind of work smarter, not harder. I learned some of the tricks of the trade, the shortcuts, for how you can still be a decent instructor with a good class, but minimize the amount of time that you’re actually having to be in the trenches working. (Stan)

It is important to note that from the study of professional identity, more recent literature has emerged that pertains to teacher identity development. Previous research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) that finding a concise definition of teacher identity in existing literature is challenging, yet, Sachs (2005) offered a description that is helpful in understanding teacher identity within a social and institutional context:

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

Sachs’ description of teacher identity helps us understand Stan’s response: within the context of his department, he was learning the expectations of him in his role and he was learning to adjust his beliefs and his behaviors to accommodate those external expectations. Beauchamp
and Thomas (2009) also noted that “the school environment, the nature of the learner population, the impact of colleagues and of school administrators can all be influential in shaping a student or new teacher identity, as of course are their own experiences as learners in schools” (p. 184), further emphasizing the important role contextual factors play in shaping teacher identity.

Maxima reported changes is herself as well, but unlike Stan, she focused less on changes in the way she performs tasks in her response and instead she discussed changes in the way she views herself as a person. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) suggested that “what may result from a teacher’s realization of his or her identity, in performance within teaching contexts, is a sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even to transform the context...it is apparent that a heightened awareness of one’s identity may lead to a strong sense of agency” (p. 183). This is reflected in Maxima’s statement: “You know, and it’s a whole...it’s a whole different mindset for me, even the presentation-of-self became different.”

Similarly, when asked to describe whether she had noticed any change in herself or in the way she viewed herself since taking on the GTA role, Brooklyn responded quickly:

I have a lot more patience. A lot more patience. I have more tolerance and I’m more likely to engage in educational discussions, whereas before... if somebody said something I didn’t like, like you know racist, sexist, whatever... I would just check out, like I’m not having a conversation with you, because we’re not going to agree. But now, I’ll engage. I’m like, you know what? Let’s talk about this. (Brooklyn)

This was a fairly typical response: participants were quick to mention skills they had acquired or tangible or measurable outcomes such as presentations or recognitions that they had received.
While participants reported positive ways in which they had developed their professional and teacher identities, they sometimes described these changes in contrast to the turbulent experiences they reported having in their roles as GTA. For instance, in this example Brooklyn reported having more patience... but the contrasted it with having challenging experiences with students making racist or sexist remarks. When these contradictions arose, I asked participants to reflect on this juxtaposition, and several indicated that in light of challenging experiences, receiving mentoring or positive support helped them overcome the obstacle, and often, helped them build an increased sense of ability and determination.

I think being a TA has given me confidence. I felt really deflated the first time I experienced a student in class saying something overtly racist and openly contesting and showing opposition to the content I was teaching that day—I wasn’t sure how to respond to him. My mentor sat down with me and helped me come to realize... and since then... I have kind of thought, I’m the expert, you know. Here is what I say in my expert opinion. I get to offer you this insight, and you’re here in class to get this insight, and the University has trusted me to give you this insight. This confidence reflects in my daily life because I am able to have these conversations—no, I want to have these conversations rather than shy away from them. (Brooklyn)

The change that Brooklyn reported is significant. But equally significant is the way in which she reported arriving at the epiphany that led her to that change.

In reviewing data that pertained to career preparation, I already mentioned previous research by Golde (2008) which argued that “opportunities to explicitly discuss, observe, and enact the shared values of academic like are rare” and that “few students have or take the
opportunity to reflect on why they are doing what they do and what kind of faculty member they want to be” (p. 23). Brooklyn’s quote demonstrates that having the opportunity to sit with her mentor and discuss the impact of her negative student interaction helped her reframe the way she thought about the interaction—and about herself. In her own research, Freese (2005) demonstrated “the important role reflection can play in helping pre-service teachers frame and reframe their thinking in order to improve their teaching and their students’ learning” (p. 103).

Reflection is critical in the development of teacher and professional identity.

Differential Outcomes of Transformative Learning Experiences

One major assumption that exists in current literature regarding transformative learning experiences is that the outcome of these experiences is positive. For example, Cranton (1994) noted that “transformative learning theory leads us to view learning as a process of becoming aware of one’s assumptions and revising those assumptions based on critical self-reflection” (p. 730).

This view of transformative learning is narrow—it assumes that critical self-reflection can be resolved within an individual and rationally integrated and incorporated into their view of their “self.” Yet, Cranton also noted that “reflection is key in becoming aware of distorted assumptions and meaning perspectives” (p. 731). At present, existing literature suggests that the process of transformation via transformative learning experiences is linear and internal to an individual (in this case, a graduate teaching assistant): the person experiences a disorienting dilemma, critically reflects about the dilemma, and undergoes transformation (see Figure 1).
Although critical reflection is seen as key to the notion of transformative learning experiences, the critical reflection component is largely unexplored and undefined in existing literature. Golde (2008) asserted that “few students have or take the opportunity to reflect on why they are doing what they do and what kind of faculty member they want to be” (p. 23), and this statement held true amongst those who participated in this study. Critical reflection did not prove to be an automatic response to a disorienting dilemma. It becomes important, then, to understand how critical reflection comes about. The data in Chapter 4 suggests differential outcomes of disorienting dilemmas occur in the course of the graduate teaching assistant experience, and these outcomes, in fact, may be mediated or shaped by intervening forces (see Figure 2). Looking at these differential outcomes and mediating factors helps us understand when and how transformative learning experiences affect graduate teaching assistants, and to what extent these experiences can be influenced by outside supports.
Extant literature suggests that the outcomes of transformative learning experiences are positive in nature and that they play an important role in self-actualization. Unfortunately, this narrow view leaves the following question unanswered: If a person faces a disorienting dilemma but does not ultimately emerge with a positive transformation, does that mean that the experience was not transformative? Is it not possible that a transformation also have a neutral or negative impact on an individual? Literature from the field of psychology and social psychology suggest that there could be other outcomes from a disorienting dilemma. In order to best understand the possible outcomes, we can review some possibilities from this hypothetical scenario:

Bethany is a Christian woman. In her life, she has only dated Christian men because that is what she was taught to do by the church she has always attended. She saw this example from her role models (her parents, who are Christians) and her peers (friends from her
community, who are Christians). She meets a man and starts dating him, and she truly believes that he is “the one.” Then, she finds out that he is Jewish.

This hypothetical scenario describes a situation in which Bethany is experiencing a disorienting dilemma. All of her assumptions and beliefs are being challenged. According to transformative learning theory, Bethany will critically reflect on her previous beliefs and incorporate her newfound knowledge into her identity and self to become a better, more positively transformed individual.

This is absolutely a plausible outcome, but it may not be the only outcome possible. I propose two alternatives: First, Bethany could have a “neutral” or unresolved reaction. She neither affirms nor denies her previous belief system. She avoids the feeling of cognitive dissonance by rationalizing the situation in her own mind (for instance, “he says he is Jewish but he is really Christian at heart”). No transformation takes place and the disorienting dilemma is unresolved. Second, in the case of a “neutral” or unresolved outcome, it is possible that little critical reflection took place. In fact, it may be the case that some individuals (especially when left to their own devices) purposefully avoid the opportunity to reflect critically in order to avoid feelings of cognitive dissonance. Last, Bethany could have a negative reaction. She critically reflects on the situation and realizes that her previous values and beliefs were discriminatory in nature and inconsistent with her worldview. She dismisses her friends and family, leaves the church, and becomes depressed. Bethany has certainly undergone a transformation, but it is possible that the outcome is not positive—Bethany now has a high level of negative affectivity, self-focused rumination, and she feels alienated and isolated.
Recognizing multiple outcomes stemming from disorienting dilemmas leads to another gap in the existing literature that pertains to the origin of critical reflection. It is established in the literature that critical reflection is necessary for positive transformation (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1990). The data gathered from participants in this study provides some insights into how critical reflection happens with or without purposeful intervention. Some supports (such as peers, mentors, etc.) have been established in the literature as instrumental to success, but existing research fails to connect their role to the mediation of disorienting dilemmas. The participants in this study offered insights into their experiences with navigating disorienting dilemmas, and after the discussion of the differential outcomes of disorienting dilemmas below I will provide insights from the participants into the ways that their supports mediated the outcomes of disorienting dilemmas.

As previously noted, this study revealed that GTAs experience a variety of disorienting dilemmas including both micro-level experiences (such as their interactions with other individuals and small group) as well as macro-level experiences (such as the navigation of institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support within the organizational structure) during their tenure in this role. Data analysis also revealed that evidence exists that amongst the group of graduate teaching assistants who participated in this study, these disorienting dilemmas may have presented opportunities for transformative learning experiences, and at least some of those experiences were positive. However, data in this study also illustrate that disorienting dilemmas do not inherently lead to positive transformation as the theory might suggest—rather, these experiences may lead to transformation with positive outcomes; they may lead to a “neutral” outcome or no outcome at all, remaining largely unresolved; or they
may result in transformation with negative outcomes. The following paragraphs will offer a discussion of the data presented in Chapter 4 which supports this finding.

Neutral or Unresolved Outcomes from Transformative Learning Experiences

In the literature review in Chapter 2, I discussed previous research that indicates a variety of stressors likely to impact graduate students and graduate teaching assistants. These studies have revealed that graduate teaching assistants are often contending with new role expectations (Gardner, 2008), high performance demands (Gardner, 2009), and lack of preparation (Worthen, 1992). They also may experience dissonance between their expectations for their experience and the reality of their circumstance, so in addition to other unanticipated stressors, the conflict between expectations and reality may be another contributing factor underlying the difficulties faced by graduate teaching assistants (Nerad & Miller, 1996). In their research, El-Ghoroury, et al. (2012) found that “over 70% of the graduate students included in their sample reported a stressor that interfered with their optimal functioning” (p. 127). Data from this study revealed consistent trends and in line with previous studies, academic responsibilities, finances and debt, anxiety, and a poor work-life balance all arouse in interviews as concerns (and sources of disorientation) of graduate teaching assistants. Transformative learning theory, then, might suggest that these students should reflect critically on their experiences so that they may confront their existing beliefs and values and integrate new ideas into their worldview, and thus a positive transformative learning experience should occur. At times, when I asked participants questions about whether they had critically reflected on these issues interesting responses arose.
I did not ask participants any questions specifically about their student loan debt, but three of them mentioned it in the course of our interviews. Jenna noted that she was concerned about approaching the job market and simply hoped that she would be able to find a job that would allow her to repay her student loans. She expressed a great deal of angst in this part of the conversation, going so far as to say “I just hope that one day, I can live in an apartment that’s not a piece of shit, and maybe afford a car payment. This is stressful. It has been really stressful.” It was clear to me that Jenna had considered and had spent a great deal of time thinking about her financial situation. She seems to have reflected critically about it, as she had considered dropping out at one point, and she had taken a part time job to alleviate the necessity to take out loans at another point. Given that it seemed critical reflection had taken place, I sought to understand how she processed this critical reflection and what positive transformative experience she had undergone as a result.

To uncover these insights, I asked Jenna questions about whether she sought support in dealing with this stress—whether she had been able to confide in peers, mentors, faculty, whether there were any supports on campus to help her with this. She paused and responded thoughtfully. She had talked with others about her situation but did not find that experience supportive or cathartic. Her peers empathized because, she said, many were in a similar situation. Faculty mentors often failed to provide helpful insights: Jenna speculated that many of them were “so far removed from the graduate student experience that they were blissfully ignorant” about the challenges of trying to survive on the graduate teaching assistant stipend. They also were unaware of the bleak job market that Jenna perceived as available to her. They
shied away from logistical conversations about loan repayment by simply assuring her that the loans would be worth it in the end.

Surprisingly, Jenna had also sought institutional support—she visited the career center to discuss employment prospects. This led to another interesting point in our discussion. Jenna said with the help of the career center did help her find one job in non-profit leadership that she was considering applying for, but recognized that the competition would be fierce since this particular position was in a well-recognized, prestigious organization. “I’m thinking about applying for it, but I’m intimidated by the competition. It would be a great job, but you know, at the same time, like they’re not going to hire me. I do a lot of talking myself out of applying for jobs. Imposter syndrome... you know.” Again I asked Jenna questions about how she processed these concerns. She hadn’t talked to peers about her “imposter syndrome” (the idea that others will eventually discover that you don’t actually know as much as you should). Mentors dismissed the concern by saying “everyone has that” and “not to worry about it.” So, the data revealed that at times, Jenna sought to address her concerns by seeking support from peers, faculty members from her department, and institutional supports such as the career center.

When I asked questions about the transformational outcomes from these experiences, I was surprised. Jenna reported no transformation. She hadn’t come to any realizations about herself. Jenna’s story met the criteria of a “disorienting dilemma” at several points: existing information was confronted with new information (for instance, when she felt anxiety about whether she was making good decisions about taking out student loans but realized that peers were in a similar situation and faculty assured her that she had made good decisions; or when
she felt concerns about the job market but found evidence of a job that she was qualified for; or when she found a job that she was qualified for but then began to question her likelihood of obtaining the position or actually possessing the skills that her qualifications show she has).

However, even upon extensive critical reflection, Jenna had not resolved any of the dissonance she originally struggled with, and she had not incorporated any new perspectives into her personality or identity as the theory suggests. In this case, the outcome of having experienced a disorienting dilemma is neutral—nothing positive or negative stemmed from the disorientation or critical reflection. Jenna did not come more committed and optimistic about her studies, nor did she alter her course, exit her program, or experience any additional anxieties or depression. Rather, she has simply continued onward as the dilemma has remained unresolved.

Data from other participants in this study suggested similar outcomes. Individuals were at times no closer to transformation than before they experienced disorienting dilemmas. Previous research indicates that this is not unusual, as Worthen (1992) stated, “the experience of being a graduate teaching assistant is one of frustration and uncertainty” initially as a result of “information and preparation for their duties and responsibilities... and later from a lack of direction and feedback” (p. 10). Worthen suggested that only later, in retrospect, can this confusion, frustration, and disorientation be perceived as beneficial overall. However, caution should be used when sampling people retrospectively to determine whether their experiences had been worthwhile overall—it is likely that sampling bias would create a skewed dataset as those available to answer the question would likely be those who persevered.
In fact, sampling bias is not the only challenge to understanding the true effects of disorientation. Studies that have previously looked at the benefits of mentoring, the outcomes of specific training programs, even the few that have sought to examine the overall impact of the GTA experience have suffered from threats to external validity primarily as a result of selection bias, but also threats to internal validity because of assumptions and faulty premises about the types of challenges and needs of graduate teaching assistants. A study by Sandi-Urena, Cooper, and Gatlin (2010) for example, postulated that laboratory instruction offers chemistry graduate students intellectually stimulating environments and the researchers sought to understand what effect facilitating the lab would have on GTAs’ epistemological and metacognitive development. They hypothesized that lab facilitation would translate into scientific professional growth. The positive assumptions about laboratory instruction and epistemological and metacognitive development made by the researchers set the study up to find positive outcomes within a sample (graduate teaching assistants who persist) that would be most likely offer confirmation bias.

**Negative Outcomes from Transformative Learning Experiences**

Making assumptions that disorienting dilemmas result in positive transformative experiences not only obscures the possibility of these disorienting dilemmas remaining unresolved, it also denies the possibility that transformative learning experiences will occur, but the outcome for those individuals is negative rather than positive. In the literature review in Chapter 2, I argued that disorienting dilemmas may be embodied in stress, anxiety, fear, or any number of emotional manifestations, as an individual grapples with the cognitive dissonance
(psychological discomfort due to an inconsistency between a person’s attitudes, behaviors, or emotions) that ensues. Data analyzed in Chapter 4 confirmed that disorientation did manifest physically or emotionally in a variety of ways, and it revealed that at times, transformation did too. Some data suggested that transformation was a process that concluded in ways that the individual found disturbing, jarring, and negatively damaging to their identities, perspectives, and worldviews.

In Chapter 4, I revealed the story that Dylan shared with me about his experiences with faculty members in his department and how their behaviors, from his perspective, were akin to a hazing process. Again, it was clear that Dylan had critically reflected on this situation—he had reflected so much that he was able to accurately summarize the institutional policy on hazing because he had spent time reading information and reflecting on his experiences in an attempt to understand whether the institution actually had policies in place to help guide him through this situation. He shared his concerns with trusted peers, who tried to help him make sense of his experiences. He was very open with friends and family outside of the institution and felt that they offered a lot of emotional support. He experienced a great deal of confusion because some of the faculty who created this stress assured him that “they were preparing him for the life of an academic” and that “they had persevered in similar conditions and they felt confident that he could too.” He wasn’t sure if he was being too sensitive or too dramatic. He believed his department viewed him as apathetic, incapable, or unintelligent. The mixed messages he was receiving kept him challenging his old perceptions (that he was a smart, capable, intelligent student, and that faculty members cared for him and kept his best interests and well-being in
mind) with new perceptions (that his struggles were the result of his inadequacies and incapability and that faculty might be actively creating obstacles that would set him back).

Festinger (1962) believed that when a person experiences this level of cognitive dissonance, they would seek to reduce the discomfort, and further would try to avoid situations that might increase dissonance. Thus, dissonance becomes a motivator for action (which could include actively seeking to resolve the dissonance, or actively avoiding its cause). In this case, Dylan found himself in a double-bind. He couldn’t simply avoid the cause of his dissonance because it stemmed from interactions with faculty he needed to interact with in order to complete his studies. So just as Lerner (1991) suggested, he continued as best as possible to navigate a toxic kind of chronic stress (defined by Lerner as stress with: a source that is sometimes difficult to identify, though it is diffused throughout the environment and a persistence that doesn’t seem to have a clear beginning or end point and offers no clear opportunity for a person to realize relaxation) and often turned the blame for his circumstance on himself. In a department and institution that embraces the concept of meritocracy, self-blaming is an ideal defense because once Dylan acknowledged that the situation was of his own making, he regained some power (at least in theory) to pull himself up by his bootstraps and try harder to resolve his own concerns. Of course self-blame allows the larger systemic issues to go unchecked, and the individual’s stress is allowed to continue to manifest in the background.

Lerner (1991) helps us understand the connection between self-blame and workplace stress. He notes that “even when people do make the connection between their own health and the situation at work, they often feel bad about themselves for not being ‘tougher’ or better at coping” (p. 31). When we internalize our failures, we generate additional stress,
which ultimately takes a toll on our self-esteem and mental well-being. Previous studies on the consequential impacts of stress have demonstrated this point. Kreger (1995), for instance, showed in his research that graduate students’ reports of stress are inversely correlated with their measures of self-esteem, but positively correlated with their measures of depression. In other words, when graduate students perceive more stress, their self-esteem is likely to be lower while they are also likely to feel more depressed. Although Kreger’s study was not intended to pinpoint causation, he hypothesized that self-esteem and stress have an interactive effect on graduate student depression.

The issue of workplace stress is compounded when interpersonal interactions are complicated by inappropriate behaviors of colleagues and supervisors, and Keashly and Neuman (2010) found that more bullying takes place in academia (including bullying between faculty members or bullying between a faculty member and a graduate student) than in other work environments. Martin, Goodboy, and Johnson (2015) argued that these behaviors do exist, and include punitive actions such as grading to punish; demoralizing actions such as preaching rather than teaching and spreading false rumors; and unethical actions such as encouraging research that ignores ethical standards, discriminating, and using students for labor without pay. If students believe they are being bullied, they will more likely threaten to quit or actually leave their programs (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). According to Lovitts and Nelson (2000):

Students who do not finish the degree often leave with a sense of personal failure; many cannot see how their departmental culture influenced their departure; consequently, they are as likely to blame themselves as the departmental environment.
They have to abandon a deeply held professional image of themselves, an image constructed not only by expectations of receiving [the degree, but in the case of graduate teaching assistants,] years of research and teaching. They have to construct new self-images and careers. And they have to do so when they are demoralized and often deeply in debt. (p. 50)

In these instances, as seemed to be the case in some of my interviews, individuals who confronted a disorienting dilemma did experience a transformation: however, unlike their positively transformed peers, these individuals struggled with decreased self-esteem, a greater likelihood of depression, and quite possible the early exit from their role as graduate student and graduate teaching assistant.

Summary

Data in this study revealed that disorienting dilemmas are clearly part of the GTA experience, including both micro-level experiences (such as interactions with other individuals and small group) as well as macro-level experiences (such as the navigation of institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support within the organizational structure) during their tenure in this role. Data analysis also revealed evidence that amongst the group of graduate teaching assistants who participated in this study, these disorienting dilemmas may have presented opportunities for positive transformative learning experiences. However, data in this study also illustrate that disorienting dilemmas do not inherently lead to positive transformation as the theory might suggest—rather, these experiences may lead to
transformation with positive outcomes; they may lead to a “neutral” outcome or no outcome at all, remaining largely unresolved; or they may result in transformation with negative outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the perspectives of selected graduate teaching assistants regarding their work. This research has been guided by the following exploratory questions:

5) What challenges and opportunities do graduate teaching assistants encounter in their work?

6) How do graduate teaching assistants perceive the teaching experiences they have during their tenure in that role?

7) To what extent do GTAs’ descriptions of their experience constitute what scholars describe as “disorienting dilemmas” associated with transformative learning experiences?

8) What kinds of supports are perceived as available or important to the graduate teaching assistants?

In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature that suggest that, despite the growing need for and use of graduate teaching assistants in higher education settings, GTAs’ experiences are largely unexplored and poorly understood. In Chapter 3, I described the methods that were used to address the research questions in this study, as well as to describe the participants who took part in the study and the methods used to collect and analyze the data. In Chapter 4, I
described the participants (the data source), the relevant data, and the findings that emerged from its analysis, including the three themes which emerged from the data: (1) GTA perceptions of the GTA role; (2) navigating institutional context- hierarchies, obstacles, and support; and (3) disorienting dilemmas, mediating factors, and identity development. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the implications for the findings of this study. Looking at disorienting dilemmas through micro- and macro- perspectives, this chapter shows the relevance of this study to existing conversations already taking place in the literature. Chapter 6 takes an applied focus to discuss implications from this study with practical recommendations for departments and institutions in their work and interactions with graduate teaching assistants. This chapter also offers suggestions for future research in addition to the practical implications of the findings.
Chapter 6: Implications from this Study

This study is significant and timely for several reasons: Attrition is a major problem in graduate education, with an average rate of completion at only approximately 50% (Nettles & Millett, 2006). This represents a failed investment in time and money to both institutions and the individuals who depart. Given that graduate teaching assistants are responsible for teaching a significant number of undergraduate students—quality undergraduate education is therefore dependent on training and support for these instructors. Working as a graduate teaching assistant is often considered an apprenticeship for the professoriate (Young, 1995, p. 180). As tenure-track jobs are becoming more and more difficult to obtain (Nelson, 1997), it is increasingly important that departments are doing everything they can to prepare their graduate students for success in the job market, and to prepare them for the variety of jobs they may need to consider as research-only positions are increasingly non-existent for new hires. While this study is small and not intended to be used as a generalizable description of all GTA experiences, this information does allow us to contemplate implications of the study, especially in light of existing literature and research that can be more broadly applied to graduate teaching assistants and their experiences and outcomes.

As discussed throughout this chapter, this study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it demonstrates that the experiences of graduate teaching assistants can
meet the established criteria for disorienting dilemmas, and that those dilemmas can happen on both micro-level and macro-level interactions with individuals as well as departmental and institutional organizations and structures. Next, by using an extended case study approach to collecting thick and rich data, I was able to evaluate the extent to which existing theories of transformative learning experiences encompass all possible outcomes of transformation. Small (2009) suggested that as a result of this unique attribute, extended case studies provide “a potentially effective way of improving theories [by examining] unique or deviant cases to improve on existing theories” (p. 21). Evaluating differential outcomes of disorienting dilemmas allows us to more robustly evaluate the variety of transformations that a person may undergo as a result of such an experience. Last, this study illustrates that the process of critical reflection is not an automatic response to a disorienting dilemma, nor is it likely a solitary endeavor. Participants in this study discussed the importance of critical reflection, and offered specific experiences with critical reflection that seemed to help them shape the direction of their transformations. Those who were offered supportive, insightful, nonjudgmentally guided opportunities for critical reflection reported positive transformations whereas those who were offered little or no space for critical reflection, those who received little or no guidance, or those whose guidance was contradictory to their values or ideals tended to report that their disorientation was not yet resolved or that their transformative experience was negative as they struggled to internalize values that did not coincide with their own.

Despite these revelations from this study, it would be impossible, and perhaps unwise, to try to eliminate all disorienting dilemmas from the graduate teaching assistant experience. However, given the new awareness this study provides about these experiences and their
diverse possible outcomes, it is important to consider how to best bridge this information from theory to practice with the overall goal of improving GTA experiences. To accomplish this goal, it is critical for institutions of higher education to evaluate departmental and institutional cultures, because, as Lovitts and Nelson (2000) stated that:

...evidence suggests that attrition is deeply embedded in the organizational culture of graduate school and the structure and process of graduate education. Students leave less because of what they bring with them to the university than because of what happens to them after they arrive. A student who enters a department whose culture and structure facilitate academic and personal integration is more likely to complete the Ph.D. than a student whose departmental culture is hostile or laissez-faire. A student invited into the department's academic and social community is more likely to succeed than a student left entirely to his or her own resources. (p. 50)

In other words, according to Lovitts and Nelson (2000), “it is time to stop blaming the victim” (p. 50). Evaluating departmental and institutional culture is more important than “just” keeping people happy: graduate student completion rates and success hinges on it, as do the quality of undergraduate education, future faculty success, and the very continuity of our disciplines. Based on existing literature about graduate student experiences and outcomes, the data that I have analyzed pertaining to graduate teaching assistants’ experiences, and my professional experiences as a mentor of GTAs, my suggestions for implementation at departmental and institutional levels as a result of this study are discussed in the following sections.
Departmental Recommendations for Improving the Graduate Teaching Assistant Experience

Departments can take several steps to improve departmental culture in ways that facilitate graduate teaching assistant success. While some of these suggestions are intended for individuals based on their role within a given department, it is imperative that these changes are supported and guided by those in administrative roles. Changing an organizational culture requires compassion but also a firm commitment to recognizing the ineffectiveness and destructiveness of a negative departmental climate. One way to accomplish this mission, according to Hickson and Roebuck (2009), is to acknowledge and count academic citizenship as much as teaching, research, and service in faculty members’ yearly reviews. Martin, Goodboy, and Johnson (2015) argued that “some faculty members might excel in the traditional three categories yet be unsatisfactory in academic citizenship (e.g., bullying graduate students, shunning departmental activities) and causing considerable harm to the departmental culture and to graduate students’ success and satisfaction” (p. 449-450). Once all faculty members are aware of the administrators’ stance on department culture, the remaining suggestions will be easier to implement.

It is imperative that graduate students have a realistic understanding about the academic and programmatic requirements before entering the program. Similarly, it is imperative that those individuals who are hired as graduate teaching assistants have a clear and realistic understanding of what this position entails and what workload will be expected of them. Too often, students like Maxima are confused about the terms of their employment and the labor expectations that will be required of them upon acceptance of the terms. Outstanding undergraduate students are typically judged on previous academic merits—test
scores, undergraduate GPA, and as Maxima noted, a record of outstanding undergraduate research and subsequently lured to graduate programs with the promise of tuition waiver and stipend, but with little understanding of what work will be required in exchange for those terms. Departments can help ease this confusion by including thorough information about the terms of an assistantship or other financial aid awards in their recruiting materials. This information should be as transparent and easy to understand as possible. Departments can also create or supplement institutional employment agreements by creating job descriptions and including those descriptions along with any formal contracts for employment that the institution offers. Asking potential employees to acknowledge that they understand the contractual terms of their employment, the tasks that may be required of them, and the expectations they must meet for to be considered successful would alleviate any confusion on the part of the potential graduate assistant in advance of entering into an agreement with the department.

It is equally important that an employment contract does not exist in a vacuum between the department management and the students—the faculty need to be aware of the department’s expectations for assistants as well. This is particularly true of faculty who work in a supervisory role, who should be given their own set of departmental expectations as well. Individuals who wish to supervise graduate teaching assistants should understand the importance of their role. They are directly responsible for preparing future faculty, so having a firm grasp of knowledge of theories of mentoring and pedagogy should be a requirement of the role. Departmental administrators can help emphasize the importance of this work in any number of ways that credit the faculty members for their efforts. For instance, this can be
accomplished by: adding time to the faculty assignment, assigning duties that require faculty to
gain or enhance knowledge of pedagogy, rewarding continuing education in areas related to
the assignment, providing rewards in this area similar to the rewards offered for outstanding
teaching or research, etc. An administration that openly supports the role of GTA supervisor or
mentor encourages a culture that elevates the status of this work.

In addition to the faculty members who are directly responsible for the supervision of
graduate teaching assistants, all faculty members in a department can improve the
departmental culture by understanding and acknowledging the ways in which disorienting
dilemmas happen for GTAs and others in the department, and by normalizing their existence.
Too often, graduate teaching assistants feel ashamed or embarrassed to admit that they are
struggling with some aspect of their work. A struggle may be perceived as a failure or as
evidence of incapability on the part of the student, and as a result an issue may become an
isolating or alienating experience for the person suffering. Unfortunately, when struggles are
hidden rather than addressed, they usually do not go away. Instead, they fester silently until
they can no longer be hidden and once they are revealed, the struggles are often far worse
than they initially were. Normalizing these struggles would help to create a culture in which
problems can be addressed sooner, leading to improved outcomes for all involved, and for the
climate of the department as well.

Faculty members should make all efforts (and should be guided by departmental
administrators) to ameliorate any bullying behaviors between faculty members. Aside from
Hall’s (2007) very poignant statement about bullying: “no amount of talent or ‘genius’ gives one
the right to treat one’s fellow department citizens as objects of scorn or as pin cushions for
abuse” (p. 68), there are two additional reasons to ensure that bullying is absent from departmental culture. First, colleague-on-colleague bullying by insulting, denigrating, or disparaging another faculty member’s character or the quality of their work can prove detrimental to giving graduate students the opportunities to explore their own interests—the hidden curriculum shows them that some areas of expertise (and some career paths, like teaching as an alternative to research) are implicitly valued more than others. Additionally, when bullying is perceived in a workplace, even the nonbullied individuals view the environment negatively (Martin, Goodboy, & Johnson, 2015, Misawa, 2015; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011).

These same kinds of behaviors should obviously be banned in faculty-on-student relationships. Faculty members should always treat graduate students with respect and dignity, and in the case of graduate teaching assistants—if we want to view this role as preparation for future faculty—graduate teaching assistants should be treated with the same professional respect as other colleagues. If there are problems with their performance, they should be addressed with a performance evaluation in much the same way a department would approach a faculty member. The use of “carrots” or negative incentives for the purpose of motivation, threats of funding denial over non-performance related issues, or the use of verbal hostility or aggression should all be avoided if a supportive environment is the goal of the department.

Similarly, the department should encourage graduate teaching assistants to socialize, interact, and support one another in their work. GTAs should never be pitted against one another or made to feel like they are in direct competition with another person for some limited resource. Graduate teaching assistants should be encouraged to create opportunities
for themselves to discuss their challenges and successes related to teaching, and at least some of this time should be free of faculty influence. In this way, GTAs have privacy to voice concerns without fear of judgment and also have the autonomy to determine which topics may be most relevant and helpful for them.

Beyond these opportunities to create social supports, offering professional development opportunities for graduate students can improve a departmental culture. Many participants in this study revealed that when their departments offered these opportunities, it helped to socialize them and made them feel more part of the department. However, it is very important that professional development opportunities include a variety of topics. For graduate teaching assistants like Jordan, who noted that her department’s “professional development” was really a series on “research development,” the opportunity to improve the departmental culture was lost in the implicit message that only some professional development goals were worth discussing. In the academic labor market, we no longer have the luxury of assuming that all graduate students will leave the academy and be able to secure a professorship with an exclusive or majority research assignment. Even for the portion of graduate students for whom this is their goal, most of them will not be able to land tenure-earning positions at research universities because the labor market is simply oversaturated while the funding for these kinds of positions continues to dwindle. It is essential that departments realize the shift in the labor market and prepare their graduate students for a variety of employment outcomes. Thus, a robust professional development series accomplishes two important goals: it offers realistic employment prospects and alternative
career alternatives for graduate students to consider, and it shows that the department values its graduate students and their diverse and equally valuable life goals.

In addition to the professional development opportunities offered to graduate students, special professional development workshops, trainings, and events should be offered to graduate teaching assistants. Faculty members and administrators should provide “a unified front” in supporting all types of development and thus should be careful not to diminish the importance of some opportunities which may be of interest to graduate teaching assistants. Another way to demonstrate commitment to diverse career paths and to the work being done in the classroom by graduate teaching assistants would be for departments to create bridges between departmental and institutional supports: for instance, if the department wants to demonstrate its commitment to teaching, it might invite speakers from the Center for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (CITE) or perhaps even from other institutions to allow graduate teaching assistants to interact with professionals who have chosen teaching as a career path in order to better understand how these jobs may vary.

All of the above mentioned suggestions are intended to minimize the trauma that may be associated the experience of a disorienting dilemma, and to provide the supports and departmental culture in which a graduate teaching assistant feels comfortable and encouraged to confront this disorientation. This, of course, does not eliminate the disorientating dilemma, but it does provide an ideal framework in which an individual can critically reflect with positive reinforcement and guidance, so that she is in control of her own transformation. One additional point is that departments can make an effort to normalize disorienting dilemmas. Assuring graduate teaching assistants that the disorientation is a normal part of the GTA
experience and that they have the full support of the faculty and department in dealing with these feelings could alleviate their concerns about being open with faculty peers and encourage them to seek help and guidance as it is needed.

**Institutional Recommendations for Improving the Graduate Teaching Assistant Experience**

Publically available institutional literature is often the first place that potential students look for information as they make decisions about where to pursue their academic studies. Institutions, therefore, should take great care to make as much information available as possible in publications and on institutional websites, and should take steps to ensure that information communicated is accurate. Orientation for new graduate students is important, but an additional orientation for graduate teaching assistants should be held to ensure that GTAs are familiar with the institution’s expectations of them, and also to help them become acquainted with the institutional resources that are available to them.

Like departmental expectations for professional development, the institution can also offer workshops and opportunities to develop professionally for graduate teaching assistants. Emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives on teaching would accomplish two goals: it would allow GTAs to advance their teaching skills and abilities by learning from others who may possess different sets of knowledge and pedagogical skills. Additionally, it would encourage a development of a social network outside a GTA’s immediate department. As previously discussed, feelings of isolation and alienation are a likely contributor to graduate
student attrition, so the institution may be able to increase retention by providing a mechanism for GTAs to obtain social support.

Many participants in this study mentioned that they were aware of institutional support structures such as the Center for Innovation and Teaching Excellence, but they didn’t often take advantage of their services. They expressed some degree of confusion about whether services were for them or if they were intended only for faculty. They also at times expressed the belief that these support structures were there to help in the event that an instructor was having a problem and that the problem couldn’t be resolved within the department. GTAs didn’t always realize that these services were available when no problem exists, when an individual wants to take a proactive approach to enhancing his or her pedagogical skills or knowledge, and independent of department referral.

Institutional support structures should continue to reach out to GTAs with personalized marketing, so that GTAs know that the services are available to people who occupy their role specifically, that taking advantage of the services are not indicative of a problem and that in fact, taking advantage of the services demonstrate a commitment to teaching. Offering certificates of workshop completion would be an ideal way to provide an institutional acknowledgement or reward for GTAs (and faculty) who opt to continue to improve their practice in this way. These support structures can also contribute to the goal of GTA success and retention by providing opportunities for professional development that may not be available in departments (for instance, a workshop on understanding how developing good teaching skills translates into other industries would have been ideal for Maxima who couldn’t understand what she was getting out of her teaching experience). Providing opportunities for
socialization and institutionally mediated social support would be of great assistance to those GTAs who reported that support was not readily available in their departments.

Institutions should make all attempts to be transparent and genuine in its conversations with all employees, including graduate teaching assistants. When a GTA union exists, the institution may have an obligation to engage in collective bargaining, but institutions should go beyond these minimal contractual obligations and make a real, concerted effort to understand the concerns of GTAs, especially given that in some cases, these individuals may make up the majority of the institution’s instructional staff. Even when contract negotiations are ongoing and both sides feel they are likely to reach impasse, the institutional administration should continue to support the work of the GTAs and should never be dismissive or diminutive in an attempt to justify a lower wage or lack of compensation. Dismissing the important work that GTAs do creates an institutional culture of hostility, and causes GTAs to question their own importance and the purpose of their work. Having a strong identification with the institution is likely to increase retention, and eroding that identity may be a factor that leads to increased GTA attrition.

From the institutional level, it is also imperative that the GTAs work environment is one that demonstrates the institution’s commitment to the GTAs and its appreciation for the work they do. While budgetary realities may preclude institutions from meeting all GTA requests for salary and other benefits, the institution needs to acknowledge that GTAs make a significant contribution to the institutional mission and it should be reminded that this mission could likely not be accomplished without the work of GTAs. As such, the institution should take every effort to ensure the health and well-being of this population. Paying the highest possible wage
should be a top priority. Offering access to affordable, quality healthcare as well as preventative services for both physical and mental health should also reach the top of this list as well. Without their health and well-being, GTAs will not be able to function at their optimal performance which ultimately costs the institution in lost productivity, lower quality undergraduate experiences, and ultimately attrition at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Institutions can encourage the use of these services by advertising them to GTAs, but institutions can also work to create a culture that normalizes the use of preventative care, self-care, and mental health services. Institutions must acknowledge the outside responsibilities of GTAs by offering support for the “whole person” including access to facilities like daycare, gyms, or group activities for socialization because similar to private industry, people are likely to quit jobs when they are unable to find a work and life balance.

Last, institutions should invest in continued support of GTAs by shifting some budgetary priorities to departments, services, or units that are often dubbed “non-essential.” The Center for Innovative Teaching Excellence, for instance, provided “mission-critical” services, yet it is understaffed with only a few employees handling a workload to support the entire institution. The trickle-down effect of the work that is done by graduate teaching assistants merits the institution’s continued investment and support.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of a diverse selection of graduate teaching assistants at Southeastern Elysium University by investigating GTAs’ perceptions of
their experiences in that role, as well as their perceptions of the relative impact of those experiences. This study used a small sample size but took an in-depth look at the experiences of those participants who were included in the study. This particular study did not aim for generalizability, nor did it seek to identify the “average” experience. Instead, the goal was to thoroughly understand some variety of experiences as data points that exist on an endless continuum of possible experiences. The aim of this study was not to produce findings that can be generalized to all graduate teaching assistants or to predict the experiences of future graduate teaching assistants, and therefore seeking to report typicality would have been irrelevant. However, the themes that emerged from this research do provide insights into the how GTAs make sense of their experiences in their role of graduate teaching assistants, and the deeply understood individual cases of selected participants reported here add insight in how individuals perceive and understand their lived experiences in the context of their shared role as graduate teaching assistant.

Future research can build upon these findings in several ways. It became evident that the GTA experience varies so broadly from one department to another, and at times, even within a single department, that simply continuing to collect data on the diversity of roles and expectations would provide insights into the kinds of experiences that graduate teaching assistants may have. This particular research was a micro-study, focusing deeply on the individuals who shared a similar institutional context. In order to understand whether the themes that emerged in this context would be similar or different from other institutional contexts (such as liberal arts, private, or for-profit institutions), additional case studies would be needed.
This study employed dimensional sampling with purposeful selection in order to select diverse participants on factors such as college (academic unit), gender, race, type of assignment (taught as instructor of record/assisted another instructor/in-charge of break-out session of lab session), length of experience, and whether they have had any other teaching experience before becoming a graduate teaching assistant. These factors did yield a diverse pool of participants, but other considerations came up in interviews that may also be considerations for future solicitation of respondents. These unplanned factors which participants cited as relevant to their experiences include sexual orientation, gender expression, modality (working as a GTA in a face-to-face or online class), ability/disability, and age. Including these factors in recruitment tools would allow for additional dimensions in the sampling and participant selection. Additionally, adding questions that pertain to these factors in the interview schedule would be ideal.

Last, it is important to note that while there was great diversity in length of experience in this study, there was some selection bias inherent in the population. At the time of data collection, all GTAs in this study were still enrolled in their graduate programs. Therefore, those who had dropped out, been removed, or otherwise contributed to the attrition rate of their programs (conceivably those who faced obstacles they were not able to overcome) could not have been included in this study. Additionally, those who did participate were current GTAs, reflecting on their present or recent experiences. This is problematic for several reasons. First, many of my interviews lead to pieces of conversation that were emotionally charged because the experiences they were sharing were very recent. This, in fact, is probably responsible for the extremely high response rate in the initial intake survey, although it is interesting to note
that emotions might have contributed to a high response rate (nearly 70%), the response rate would still indicate that a huge percentage of the GTA population is feeling emotionally charged enough to reach out. Nonetheless, recruiting current graduate teaching assistants could be problematic as GTA perceptions might change with additional time for reflection on the situations they experienced. Further, while all GTAs in this study were aware of ways in which they seem to be receiving career preparation, they could only speculate about the usefulness of these activities until they are actually outside of the present institution and situated in their careers. As such, I would recommend that future studies use a longitudinal approach to capturing data over a longer span of time. Particularly, interviewing newly accepted GTAs to determine their expectations for their role, interviewing the same participants to understand their experiences throughout the role, and finally interviewing again after they leave the role to gather their reflections of how the role ultimately did or did not prepare them for careers. This method would also capture those participants who begin working as GTAs but ultimately exit the position or attrite from their programs before degree completion. Future studies may also broaden their focus: for instance, how might these compare or contrast to faculty experiences? Hierarchical microaggressions and workplace bullying might have an impact on faculty members as well. Additionally, how might GTAs respond to a researcher with a different background? It was difficult to discern whether GTAs viewed me as an insider because I could understand and relate to their experiences, or if they viewed me as an outsider knowing that I could be in a position to impose struggles such as the ones they have faced onto graduate teaching assistants under my employ. Broadening the research site, the participants, and even the interviewers and researchers could all yield additional data to help us understand (and
ideally, improve) the experiences of the graduate teaching assistants who offer so much to our students, our institutions, and our academic disciplines.
References


doi:10.1002/ir.37019969207


Challenges for teaching and learning in schools and universities (pp. 5–21). Oxford, UK: Routledge.


[http://www.Faculty.Fairfield.edu/rtorosyan](http://www.Faculty.Fairfield.edu/rtorosyan)


Dear __________,

I hope this email finds you well. The purpose of my message today is to ask you if you would be willing to participate in a research study. This study aims to gain a better understanding of graduate teaching assistants’ perceptions of their experiences in that role. You have been identified as a potential participant because you are a graduate teaching assistant at Southeastern Elysium University and you have completed at least one full (academic) year in that role. If you agree to participate, you may be asked to be interviewed on one or two occasions for no longer than one hour per interview. You may decide to withdraw from the study or discontinue your participation at any time. Your information will be kept confidential.

This study is very important because graduate teaching assistants play an incredibly important role in higher education, yet their experiences have gone largely unexplored. This study aims to shed light on the daily experiences of graduate teaching assistants and their perceptions of the impact of those experiences.

Thank you so much for considering this request. If you are interested in learning more or if you think you might be willing to participate in this study, please review the enclosed Informed Consent form. After reviewing the form, please fill out this short survey add web address of survey and feel free to contact me directly at cmpartin@usf.edu if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Christina Partin, Principal Investigator
APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Please answer the following questions, and if you are selected for participation in this study, you will be contacted to schedule a date and time that is convenient for you.

1) Please enter your name:

2) Do you identify as:
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other: ________________

3) Do you identify as (select all that apply):
   - White
   - Black, African American, or Negro
   - American Indian or Alaskan Native
   - Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Other Asian
   - Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian or Chamorro, Other Pacific Islanders
   - Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin
   - Some Other Race: ________________

4) In which college are you employed as a graduate teaching assistant?
   - College of the Arts
   - College of Arts and Sciences
   - College of Behavioral and Community Sciences
   - College of Business
   - College of Education
   - College of Engineering
   - College of Marine Science
   - College of Medicine
   - College of Nursing
   - College of Pharmacy
   - College of Public Health

5) In what department are you employed as a graduate teaching assistant?
   ________________________________
6) What kinds of duties have you been asked to do as a graduate teaching assistant (select all that apply):
   □ Teach my own class as instructor of record
   □ Assist another instructor in his or her class
   □ Lead break-out sessions or lab sessions
   □ Other: _______________________

7) How long have you been a graduate teaching assistant? ______________________

8) Did you have teaching experience (in any setting) before becoming a graduate teaching assistant?
   □ No
   □ Yes. Please describe:
   _______________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________

9) Please provide your preferred method of contact for scheduling an interview (select at least one):
   □ Email: ___________________________
   □ Phone Call: _______________________
   □ Text Message: _____________________
   □ Other: ___________________________
Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # ______________

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

This study aims to gain a better understanding of graduate teaching assistants’ perceptions of their experiences in that role. There are no anticipated risks or discomforts anticipated. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be interviewed on two occasions for no longer than one hour per interview. You may decide to withdraw from the study or discontinue your participation at any time. Your information will be kept confidential.

Please tell the study doctor or study staff if you are taking part in another research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

Investigating Transformation: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

The person who is in charge of this research study is Christina Partin. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. Christina Partin is being guided in this research by Barbara Shircliffe.

The research will be conducted at the Southeastern Elysium University.
Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to:

- Gain a better understanding of graduate teaching assistants’ perceptions of their experiences in that role.
- You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a graduate teaching assistant who has completed at least one full (academic) year in that role.
- This study is being conducted as partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education.

Study Procedures
If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in 1-2 interview sessions, which are anticipated to last no longer than one hour each or two hours total.
- The interviews will be conducted at the Southeastern Elysium University in Mystic Hall Conference Room, or if requested, another location to provide comfort and convenience to the participant.
- The audio portion of the interviews will be recorded so that they may be transcribed. Only the primary investigator (Christina Partin) will have access to these recordings. The recordings will not contain personally identifying information. As the recordings will be digital, they will be maintained in a password-protected file and will be deleted once the study has concluded.

Total Number of Participants
Approximately 5-10 individuals will take part in this study at Southeastern Elysium University.

Alternatives
You do not have to participate in this research study. Alternatives to participating in the study include:

Benefits
We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

Risks or Discomfort
This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation
You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.
Cost
There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study. However, routine medical care for your condition (care you would have received whether or not you were in this study) will be charged to you or your insurance company. You may wish to contact your insurance company to discuss this further.

Privacy and Confidentiality
We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff.

Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.

Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Florida Department of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

The sponsors of this study and contract research organization.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal
You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. The decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your employment status.

New information about the study
During the course of this study, we may find more information that could be important to you. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints
If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an adverse event or unanticipated problem, call Christina Partin at 813-974-2893.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.
Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study and authorize that my health information as agreed above, be collected/disclosed in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

______________________________________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study                      Date

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/ she understands:

- What the study is about;
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

______________________________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent / Research Authorization                      Date

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent / Research Authorization
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview #1 Protocol:

- How long have you been a graduate teaching assistant?
- Can you describe your role?
- How would you characterize your role in relationship to your department, college and Southeastern Elysium University?
  - Do you feel that your role is important?
  - Why or why not?
- Can you tell me about a typical day at work?
- Can you tell me about your “best day” at work, or a positive experience that really stands out in your mind since you entered the GTA role?
- If you have a question or need help with your role as a GTA, what do you do?
- Can you tell me about the supports you have received in your role as GTA?
  - Have these supports been useful?
  - Are there other kinds of support you wish you had?
- Can you describe any particularly difficult or challenging experiences that you have had in your role as a graduate teaching assistant?
  - If no:
    - What steps might you take next if you did face a difficult or challenging experience?
• Do you think that peer support would be helpful or important to overcome or debrief a difficult or challenging situation?

• Do you think that institutional support would be helpful or important to overcome or debrief a difficult or challenging situation?

• Do you think that support from your mentor would be helpful or important to overcome or debrief a difficult or challenging situation?

  o If yes:

    • What steps did you take after you faced the difficult or challenging experience?

    • Did you rely on peer support to overcome or debrief that situation?

    • Did you rely on institutional support to overcome or debrief that situation?

    • Did you rely on support from your mentor to overcome or debrief that situation?

• Do you feel like peer support, institutional support, or support from a mentor is available to you?

• When you have a bad day, who is the first person that you like to talk to about it?

• Can you tell me about the institutional support that is available to you?

• What kinds of institutional support have you taken advantage of?

• Can you tell me about professional development opportunities you have received?

• Can you tell me about your mentor’s role?
• Can you describe a situation in which your mentor has been very helpful to you?

• Can you think of a situation when your mentor was not very helpful to you?

• If you were mentoring graduate teaching assistants, what would you do/what would you do differently?

• Is there anything else you would like to tell me at this time?
Interview #2 Protocol:

- Have you had any experience as a graduate teaching assistant that caused you to change your beliefs, or the way you think or behave?
- Can you describe a situation that left you feeling “disturbed” or “disoriented?” For instance, after this situation you were left wondering if you had been making the right choices all along, or if what you had believed all along was actually untrue.
- Have you detected any changes in yourself since becoming a graduate teaching assistant? Can you describe those?
- Have you experienced a change in how you think about yourself?
  - Can you remember the first time you identified with other faculty as your colleagues?
  - Can you remember the first time it dawned on you that you were different than an undergraduate student?
- How often do you purposefully reflect about your GTA experiences?
  - Do your peers ever encourage you to reflect on your GTA experiences?
  - Have you ever been encouraged to reflect on your GTA experiences by any institutional support systems?
  - Has your mentor ever encouraged you to reflect on your GTA experiences?
- How do you feel after you have reflected on an experience that you have had?
- Is it important for graduate teaching assistants to have a “safe” environment in which they can discuss their experiences without fear of judgment?
Do you feel like your peers provide a “safe” environment in which you can discuss your experiences without fear of judgment?

Do you feel like institutional supports provide a “safe” environment in which you can discuss your experiences without fear of judgment?

Do you feel like your mentor provides a “safe” environment in which you can discuss your experiences without fear of judgment?

- What is the most significant experience you have had since becoming a graduate teaching assistant?

- What advice would you have for people who are considering becoming a graduate teaching assistant?
APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

June 8, 2016

Christina Partin
Sociology
4202 E Fowler Ave
CPR107
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00026082
Title: Investigating Transformation: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

Study Approval Period: 6/8/2016 to 6/8/2017

Dear Ms. Partin:

On 6/8/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Protocol Version #1 4.6.16.pdf

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Partin Informed Consent to Participate in Research #1 6.5.16.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).
It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(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.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
About the Author

Christina M. Partin, M.A. is an award winning educator, certified instructional designer, and innovative educational consultant. She has 12 years of experience as an instructor in a university setting, in face-to-face, hybrid, and online formats, during which time she has personally instructed over 11,000 students. She has had the privilege of providing future faculty training and mentoring to dozens of graduate students during her tenure at the University of South Florida. Christina was promoted to Senior Instructor (Level II) in Spring, 2013 and to Master Instructor (Level III—highest rank) in Spring, 2017. She was awarded USF’s Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award in 2013.

Christina’s research interests include the Sociology of Education and Pedagogy, Social Psychology, and Curriculum Development including Teaching with Technology. Her interdisciplinary publications and research in progress more broadly include faculty development, the incorporation of technology into higher education, and ways to provide (positive) transformative experiences to students.

Christina has published and presented on topics pertaining to improving instruction for 21st century learners (AND instructors!). She has also worked as a member of multidisciplinary teams to create and produce teaching materials and ancillaries products to facilitate face-to-face and online classroom instruction. Contact Christina directly for additional information about this study, or for information about workshops, speaking engagements, or research or publication opportunities.

Connect with Christina on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/christinapartin