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# I've Been There! Fostering Student Academic Leadership in the Online Environment

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## **Abstract**

Fostering student academic leadership in an online environment can be challenging. How can a program provide peer support to students while equipping them for current and future leadership roles? Discussion will include an analysis of the Doctoral Graduate Assistant Program and Doctoral Advisory Board opportunities at American College of Education.

## **Introduction and History of Student Leadership at American College of Education (ACE).**

Providing peer support and fostering student leadership are two important priorities for the doctoral department at American College of Education. According to Stracke & Kumar (2014), graduate students embraced peer support in research programs in favor of what was perceived as “top down” structures imposed by an institution. Lyman & Keyes (2019) recommend peer support in graduate research programs as “a tool that reduces research anxiety and helps students feel more confident in their abilities, even if they are not enthusiastic about research methods as a topic or a skill” (p. 16).

Since 2015, American College of Education (ACE) has had a Graduate Assistant (GA) program in the doctoral department. Students seeking to support others and gain leadership skills join the graduate assistant program on a term by term basis. The GA program equips students for future roles in online academia by allowing students to work alongside faculty in research courses. In 2015, the Graduate Assistant program began with one student.

In 2018, the Ed.S. and Ed.D. in Leadership Student Advisory Board was created within the doctoral department at ACE. The purpose of the doctoral advisory board is to represent student and alumni voices across the college, provide insights, convey information and perspectives, and share in collaborative communication regarding needs from the student and alumni viewpoint. The student advisors meet bi-annually to serve as a liaison for student and alumni communication and share perspectives. In 2018, the board began with 14 students and one advisor.

## **Progression of Student Leadership at ACE**

The GA program and the advisory board have provided leadership opportunities for students within the doctoral department. In 2019, ACE began considering opportunities for these students outside the department. The enrollment team has recently begun asking prospective students if speaking with a current student or alumni would assist with the decision to enroll. If prospective students prefer, a GA or advisory board member will communicate and answer any questions they may have from a student perspective. ACE's field team, which attends multiple conferences annually to promote ACE, has also begun incorporating our student leaders through involvement at various conferences. Students may attend or present for free alongside our field team members.

These opportunities enable students to gain critical leadership, experiential, and presentation skills while in the doctoral program.

## Data

Research suggests student leaders, specifically, graduate assistants gain knowledge about teaching, communication skills, managerial insights, and greater relationships with faculty (Thompson & Stiller, 2018). Faculty also gain from graduate assistant programs by increasing productivity and potential technology training from GA's. In a study conducted with physical therapy students and faculty, 33 participants agreed that professional development and graduate assistant experiences were beneficial for both students and faculty (Thompson & Stiller, 2018).

Much of the data currently collected at ACE pertains to the Graduate Assistant program. The graduate assistant program has been in existence several years and each term, students and faculty complete a reflective performance review. The review requests feedback from the participants and information is used to further inform the program during subsequent terms. Students and faculty answer Likert-type questions (See Table 1) and provide qualitative feedback in an open-ended style.

Table 1.  
GA and Faculty Assessment Likert-Scale Means for All GAs.

Likert-Type Data		Worked with TOR to enhance the learning environment in service to the college		Participated in additional college opportunities when solicited		Demonstrated support for the college	
ID	Gender	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment
1	2F 1 M	4	5	4	5	4	5
2	7F 6M	4.538461538	4.4	4	4.538461538	4.307692308	4.428571429
3	6F 6M	4.727272727	4.833333333	4.636363636	4.888888889	4.833333333	4.833333333
ALL	15F 13M	4.555555556	4.607142857	4.269230769	4.695652174	4.5	4.62962963
Maintained appropriate netiquette				Engaged with course professor to discuss best practices		Developed a better understanding of ACE grading practices and feedback	
ID	Gender	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment	GA self-assessment	TOR Assessment
1	2F 1 M	4.666666667	5	4.666666667	4.666666667	4.666666667	5
2	7F 6M	4.46153846	4.466666667	4.38461538	4.333333333	4.07692307	4.57142857
3	6F 6M	4.833333333	5	4.75	4.916666667	4.666666667	4.833333333
ALL	15F 13M	4.64285714	4.71428571	4.57142857	4.57142857	4.39285714	4.70370370

## Feedback from Students

*“In addition to serving as a GA (which I would love to do again, if possible), I am on the EdD and EdS Student Advisory Board. I love ACE and tell everyone about the school. It has been the best educational experience of my career.”*

*“When I noticed students were having difficulty, I asked the faculty what the best feedback would be to provide to the students. His guidance helped me understand how simple phrases speak loudly yet provide gentle guidance”*

*“ACE has 100% of my respect, and I support it and take pride in being a student here. With pride, I included ACE's name in my bio for a book chapter authored by me in a book to be released in April. Being a graduate assistant and a member of the advisory board provided an opportunity to serve the college.”*

*“This was a very enjoyable term. Overall good effort by students. Very impressed with detail provided by professor. I tried to assist professor by reviewing assignments in a timely manner, paying close attention to APA*

*style, template alignment, and alignment of citations to reference list. I believe the efforts helped the students improve papers in each step of the process.”*

## **Feedback from Faculty**

*“The GA has grown significantly during our course! A is mentoring and helping our students has contributed significantly to their student achievement! The academic conversations I’ve shared with the GA have been meaningful and have led to additional significant improvements! The GA’s interest in online education is stellar! If you would like me to provide additional information or clarification please let me know as it would be my honor. The hiring of the GA after graduation is highly recommended!”*

*“The GA was incredibly beneficial to work with as a GA. She kept me informed of issues, concerns, and events that were brought to her privately. The GA sought my counsel and guidance when she encountered a circumstance ensuring that she did not misspeak or create undesirable situations. I consistently agreed with the substance of what she told a student or proposed as a suggested way of addressing the situation she brought to my attention. I would be honored to work with this GA again.”*

*“The GA was very helpful in assisting students with their research topics.”*

*“The GA reached out to me to offer assistance to students in the course in any way he could. At my request, he routinely provided additional advice related to APA and style for students’ concept papers. He made himself available to students by announcing his willingness to help in the form of a course announcement and a post on the Q&A board. While assisting me in the course, the GA also successfully defended his dissertation. He was an asset to students in the course and to ACE in general.”*

## **Future of Student Leadership at ACE**

Evidenced in the feedback from the GAs and faculty, the program has developed from a practical experience, to a deeper connection with their peers, faculty and the college. The broader perspective of policies and practice are firsthand knowledge. This unparalleled glimpse into the realm of the faculty perspective fosters an appreciation for both day to day routines, and broader reflective teaching practices. Unique to the GA involvement is the focused view on both minor details and the big picture of online learning. From this perspective, GAs have reflected upon personal experience to developing initiatives which can benefit the next generation of students who enter the same courses. The future of the GA program is self- evolving by decisions of current GAs.

## **Conclusion**

The original intent for the GA program was to provide students with practical experience teaching at the collegiate level in an online learning environment. The GAs and faculty evaluate the GA in various domains based on the level of their interaction in the courses. However, all GAs and faculty provide an overall synopsis regardless of their level. GAs are evaluated based on how well they worked with faculty to enhance the learning environment, participated in additional college opportunities when solicited, demonstrated support for the college, maintained appropriate netiquette, engaged with faculty to discuss best practices, and developed a better understanding of the college’s grading practices and feedback. The intent of the GA program has developed over the years and is based on the dynamics of the GA facilitator, and the GAs.

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