Spring 5-14-2019

A Collaborative Approach Toward Onboarding for Graduate and Law Students

Yuri Kwak

University of San Diego, ykwak@sandiego.edu

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to examine the silo effect across schools when onboarding graduate and law students to the University of San Diego. My research question was, how can I collaborate with students and administrators in enhancing the onboarding experience to foster a sense of community for graduate and law students across campus? By evaluating administrators' practices and graduate and law students' experiences, I found that creating a culture of communication among administrators and involving graduate student leaders are key steps toward standardizing onboarding processes and designing opportunities for engagement among all incoming graduate and law students.

Introduction

The University of San Diego (USD) is a predominantly undergraduate-serving institution with 65% of undergraduate students making up the total student population (University of San Diego, 2019). Although USD is a majority undergraduate-serving institution, there are several schools that serve either exclusively or a majority graduate and law students, such as the School of Law, School of Leadership and Education Sciences, Kroc School of Peace Studies, and Professional and Continuing Education. Friedlander (2015) found that community and sense of belonging are important themes in the graduate student experience at USD, which is especially significant since the institution has witnessed growth in the graduate population since 2015, when Friedlander completed her action research. At the graduate level, academic programs within various schools conduct their own onboarding for their incoming students. My action research examines whether a barrier to creating a strong graduate student community exists before the academic year even begins due to (a) the lack of standardized onboarding processes across academic programs that result in incoming students receiving inconsistent information and (b) the lack of opportunities for all incoming students to connect with one another. My action research is an amalgamation of my values rooted in collaboration and community-building, my professional experience as a graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life, and my personal experience as an international graduate student at USD. The research question guiding my study is: how can I collaborate with graduate and law students and administrators to enhance the onboarding process in order to foster a strong sense of community for graduate and law students across campus?

Background

Graduate students are oftentimes seen as an extension of undergraduate students on college campuses. An assumption still exists that because graduate students are mature, focused, goal-oriented, and hold a higher education degree, they are capable of navigating

graduate school without the assistance of student service providers (Polson, 2003). Students enrolled in graduate programs today are made up of adult students who are employed full-time or part-time and who commute to and from campus (Polson, 2003) as well as traditional-age college students who enroll in graduate programs directly after completing their undergraduate degrees (Benshoff, 2015).

There is limited literature on the onboarding process of graduate students, and the literature that exists focus on academic and department-specific orientations and the academic and professional roles of graduate students. Although some studies, such as that of Coulter, Goin, and Gerard (2004), examine the needs of graduate students in areas of transition to graduate life, social activities, and peer interactions, the data in these studies is gathered from graduate students in one specific academic program. There is lack of research that includes examination of graduate students from various academic programs and schools, which produces results that limit inference to a broader student population. Pooke (2004) compiled data on campus-wide orientation practices across colleges in the United States and found that the agenda included topics on university policy, student services, facilities, and health insurance, but did not address social and recreational opportunities for graduate students. Similarly, these opportunities are not offered consistently at every graduate orientation at USD even though Graduate Student Life, an office that specializes in this, exists. Furthermore, when these opportunities are present, they come in different formats such as presentations, tabling, and receptions, which contribute to the unequal access to Graduate Student Life information.

Who is Responsible for Onboarding?

The concept of student-ready colleges emerged in response to the concept of college-ready students, which places the burden of readiness on the student when in reality, college

preparation should be a shared responsibility with the institution (McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, & Major, 2016). McNair et al. (2016) define a student-ready college as:

> one that strategically and holistically advances student success… all services and
> activities – from admissions, to the business office, to the classroom, and even to
> campus security – are intentionally designed to facilitate students' progressive
> advancement toward college completion and positive post-college outcomes. (p. 18)

This concept is equally applicable to graduate students since today's graduate students have diverse needs, demonstrating the necessity of multiple service providers (Polson, 2003).

It has been assumed that the graduate division and/or academic departments are responsible for addressing graduate students' needs (Polson, 2003), but it is crucial to identify student affairs as a key partner in building community for graduate students (Beck, 2019). While academic departments are responsible for the academic aspect, student affairs professionals are responsible for setting expectations for the environment and culture in which graduate students will be studying (Beck, 2018). In the Council of Graduate School PhD Completion Project, students who had realistic expectations of their programs were more prepared to succeed in their doctoral degrees (Beck, 2018). Academic departments that excel at acculturating students ensure that students have the advantage of both departmental and general orientation programs (Polson, 2013).

Socialization

A theme that emerged from the literature is the key role orientation plays in the dual socialization of graduate students into the university and for their future professional role. Research such as that of Gardner and Barnes (2007) focuses on the organizational socialization of graduate students at higher education institutions in order to succeed professionally, whereas other research highlights the utilization of a range of socialization techniques such as presentations from faculty, alumni, student organizations, and team-

building exercises at orientation that elicit positive attitudes of the academic programs from

the participants (Benavides & Keyes, 2016). Beyond orientation programs' intention to

socialize students to their academic and professional cultures, there is lack of literature that

explores graduate students' needs in terms of forming connections to peers. In a study of

undergraduate students, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found that the most common answers

that emerged from students' definitions of sense of belonging were feelings of comfort with

others and in their surroundings and feeling like they were part of the campus community.

While getting involved in campus extracurricular activities shaped undergraduate students'

sense of belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), graduate students placed more importance

on getting involved at the national level, such as in professional organizations, over that of

the local level at their institution (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Friedlander's (2015) study of

graduate students at USD echoes this as participants preferred more events related to

professional development.

There are four stages to the socialization of graduate and professional students:

anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) as seen in

Table 1. Canizal (2017), who was the previous graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life,

asserts in her action research that programming and outreach efforts in the informal stage

provides a structure of support for graduate students. The anticipatory stage, which "covers

the preparatory and recruitment phases as the student enters graduate and professional

programs with stereotypes and preconceived expectations" (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 12), is

the stage in which students could reevaluate their preconceived expectations based on their

interactions with the institution. Beck (2019) identified three audiences and phases of

recruiting and onboarding (see Table 2). The second phase of connecting with newly

admitted students is the most important because this is the phase in which students absorb

information like sponges (Beck, 2019). The information that is communicated to students in

this phase is a key component of the onboarding process because through observation of and

interaction with their point of contact(s), they gain clearer understanding of what they need to

know to succeed in graduate school (Weidman et al., 2001).

Table 1

Stages of Socialization in Graduate School

Anticipatory Stage	Occurs during the recruitment and admissions period as students begin to learn the expectations of the program and what it means to be a professional in a specific discipline.
Formal Stage	Begins when students are admitted to graduate programs and begin formal instruction. Students have a chance to practice their roles through their performance in coursework and interactions with faculty and students.
Informal Stage	Students rely less on the formal structures in graduate school to develop their roles and incorporate more of the informal aspects of graduate school during the stage.
Personal Stage	Students internalize the roles of the profession and establish a professional identity.

Note: Reproduced from "Global Grads: Enhancing and Understanding the International
Graduate Student Experience," by A. Canizal, 2017, unpublished master's thesis, University
of San Diego, San Diego, CA.

Table 2

Phases and Audiences of Recruiting and Onboarding

Audience	Phase
Prospective Students	Outreach and information
Newly Admitted Students	Connection
Newly Arriving Students	Orientation

Note: Adapted from "Creating a Sense of Belonging with Graduate Students: Pre-arrival
through Orientation," [Webinar] by M. Beck, 2019, in Academic Impressions.

Community

Community is an important theme especially at the graduate level in which graduate

schools in institutions such as USD operate independently in silos. Friedlander (2015) found

that co-curricular graduate student events facilitate community-building among graduate

students across all programs and contribute to their sense of belonging to USD. In their

qualitative study, Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane (2013) identified ways in which full-time doctoral students strive to obtain a school-work-life balance. In the shape of formal support, students sought out the university's counseling services, faculty, and financial resources; in the form of social support, students found support through their involvement with student organizations on campus and in their peers. While these types of social support can be cultivated throughout graduate students' time in their programs, being exposed to these opportunities and other students in the onboarding process can help to better facilitate the process.

Beck (2018) asserts that the success and well-being of graduate students are intertwined in social, spiritual, emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, and physical dimensions. At Notre Dame University, the goals of graduate orientation are to,

> create a sense of community; provide opportunities for meaningful interaction across disciplines; provide information about campus, its resources, and where to find them; promote a culture of holistic well-being; provide information about resources and opportunities in surrounding community; and provide Title IX training specific to graduate students. (Beck, 2019, 30:15)

At USD, a general graduate orientation for all incoming students such as that of Notre Dame University does not exist. In addition, each academic program does not explicitly state the goals of their orientation as, creating a sense of community and providing opportunities for meaningful interactions across disciplines. The next section provides additional context about USD, my roles as an international graduate student and graduate assistant, and the shift in institutional focus on the graduate population.

Context

USD is the organizational setting of my action research. USD offers 29 master's degrees, three doctoral degrees, five LLM degrees, and the JD degree, across eight schools:

College of Arts and Sciences, Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, Professional and Continuing Education, School of Business, School of Law, School of Leadership and Education Sciences, and Shiley-Marcos School of Engineering. In their enrollment data, USD created separate categories for Paralegal, Graduate/Master's, and Doctoral/JD students, with Graduate including credential, certificate, and non-degree students. For the purpose of my action research, I am using the term graduate and law students to encompass all of these populations. The reason why I have included paralegal students under the graduate and law student umbrella is because the programs and resources that Graduate Student Life offer are available to paralegal students. As of fall 2018, graduate and law students make up 35% of the student population and USD has witnessed significant growth in this population over the last three years (see Table 3).

Table 3

Graduate and Law Student Enrollment

Year	Enrollment	Annual Growth Rate
2015	2,604	-
2016	2,797	7.41%
2017	3,131	11.94%
2018	3,218	2.78%

Note: Adapted from "Quick Facts, Fall 2018 Enrollment by College/School," by University of San Diego, 2019.

Graduate Assistant

I am the Graduate Assistant at Graduate Student Life and a significant part of my role is to co-advise the Graduate Student Council and coordinate programs to enhance graduate student life and foster graduate student community. Orientation is the first point of contact my supervisor and I have with incoming graduate and law students. As part of my job, I attended 14 orientations in fall 2017, four in spring 2018, 14 in fall 2018, and three in spring 2019 to present information on Graduate Student Life and the social and recreational

opportunities available to graduate and law students at USD. These orientations were specific to academic programs within schools as well as international student orientations.

Graduate Student

As an international graduate student, there were three orientations I was supposed to attend in fall 2017. I attended the international student orientation and the Higher Education Leadership/SOLES orientation. The third one that I did not attend was the international orientation for students in SOLES. I personally did not attend this because it sounded redundant and because of orientation burnout – what kind of new information was I going to receive at my third orientation? Streamlining orientation for international students is particularly important since 7% of graduate students and 5% of law students are international students as of fall 2018 (University of San Diego, 2019).

Dual Roles

Based on my identities as an international graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences and as graduate assistant at Graduate Student Life, I experienced firsthand the unequal distribution of Graduate Student Life information to incoming students. At the international student orientation led by the Office of International Students and Scholars that I attended, my supervisor made a quick speech and provided informational cards on Graduate Student Life. At the SOLES resource fair, my supervisor tabled for Graduate Student Life and provided informational cards to students that approached the table. When I started my graduate assistantship, my first responsibility was to attend all 14 orientations across campus and I immediately noticed the variety in our given presentation time and format, as well as which orientations we were invited to. At some presentations, we were provided with a 30-minute slot to give a PowerPoint presentation and at others, we were provided with a 15-minute slot to give a brief presentation. Some orientations were tabling events where we did not have the opportunity to introduce ourselves

to all students and at others, we were provided with 5 minutes to give a quick speech. I was also aware that we were invited to the orientations and did not attend one for all graduate programs.

Beyond these initial observations, I noticed the lack of opportunity for graduate and law students to meet students from outside of their academic programs and schools. For a majority of incoming students, orientation is the first time they are introduced to other students and so it is important to create a space that facilitates students to connect with other students both in and outside of their academic program and school. Before the academic year picks up, it is necessary for students to be aware of the graduate student community at USD and the various opportunities for engagement that are available. I also felt that while it was significant for Graduate Student Life to be invited to participate at various orientations, it was also inefficient and wondered why our office did not do our own graduate student orientation.

Shift in Institutional Focus on Graduate Students

Since I initially developed my action research in spring 2018, there have been several institutional developments. The Division of Student Affairs experienced an organizational restructuring and as of January 2018, Graduate Student Life transitioned from the Office of Ethical Development and Restorative Practices (OEDRP) to the newly created Cohort Cluster under Student Life. The transition was a result of the reorganization of Student Affairs that emerged from data gathered on undergraduate students by an outside consulting firm, which highlighted undergraduate students' need for sense of belonging on campus. Prior to January 2018, Graduate Student Life operated more as an autonomous office. While we had monthly meetings with OEDRP, it did not make much sense as to why we were in that space as our work did not connect with the work of OEDRP. However, after the reorganization, Graduate Student Life had a platform to share goals, accomplishments, and colleagues to hold us accountable at our biweekly meetings. My supervisor now has a direct report who oversees

the Cohort Cluster and has provided our office with more institutional support than we have experienced in the past.

In the fall of 2018, my supervisor transitioned from Interim Coordinator for Graduate Student Life to Assistant Director for Graduate Student Life. The change in title is significant as she held the previous title for three years and it suggests that USD acknowledges the work we do and prioritizes graduate students' needs. The new title also enabled my supervisor to access certain spaces and enter conversations that she did not have access to before. I have visibly witnessed increased support for our office since fall 2018 with administrators asking how they can support our initiatives and campus partners willing to collaborate on events. In fall 2018, Dean Ladany was appointed to a new role as Associate Provost for Academic Outreach in conjunction with his role as Dean of School of Leadership and Education Sciences. In this role, one of Dean Ladany's areas of focus is to examine the graduate student life cycle, and conversations on the graduate student experience have been occurring at higher levels of leadership.

Methodology

I utilized an action research approach in order to improve my practice and generate new knowledge that will benefit the communities which I belong to: Graduate Student Life, graduate and law students, and USD. Action Research allowed me, as a practitioner-researcher, to adopt an insider position and examine my own practices and actions in relation with others (McNiff, 2016). As a graduate student working for graduate students, I found it essential to position myself within my research in order to highlight both personal and collective processes of learning. My epistemological assumption that improving learning and creating knowledge is a collaborative process informed my action research method of choice. I believe that community-building cannot come to fruition without dialogue among various stakeholders involved. Each cycle of my project involved collaborating with others using

McNiff's model of plan, act, evaluate, and reflect. This framework enabled me to commit to participative and collaborative working and ensure that my claim to knowledge is informed because other people's lived experiences are taken into account (McNiff, 2016). Furthermore, my action research directly reflected my official job description which states, "the GA will work with faculty and administrators to assess, identify, and address areas of graduate student life needing improvement" ("Position Description", 2017, p. 1).

Overview

Cycle	Method	Participants	Purpose
Pre-Cycle	Review pre-existing data		To examine the number, attendees, and format of each academic program and office's orientation
Cycle 1	Focus group	3 executive board members of Graduate Student Council	To explore how the Graduate Student Council can get involved in the onboarding process
Cycle 2	One-on-One Interviews	8 administrators	To examine different onboarding practices in various academic programs/schools
Cycle 3	Focus group	6 graduate and law students	To explore students' experiences of onboarding and their desire to connect with students outside of their academic program

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in various ways during my research study. The most common form of data collection was recording dialogue with participants so that I could actively listen and participate. I also took notes on major themes throughout the dialogue as well as notes on personal observations. In Cycle 3, I utilized a word association activity at the very beginning as a way to break the ice since not all of the participants knew each other.

The participants in my study are my collaborators on this project. I work closely with the Graduate Student Council Executive board members (Cycle 1) and have had contact with each of the administrators throughout my time as a GA (Cycle 2). In Cycle 3, I was intentional about recruiting students who utilize the Graduate and Law Commons and/or participate in Graduate Student Life programming. For all three cycles, the fact that I had either a personal connection and/or an established working relationship with the participants allowed for data collection to be engaging. At the same time, due to the nature of my relationships with the participants, I was especially cognizant of establishing privacy and confidentiality by using pseudonyms and avoiding mentions of job titles.

Limitations

One of my largest limitations was participant representation. In Cycle 2, I was not able to get a participant from the College of Arts and Sciences, specifically Masters in International Relations program. In Cycle 3, I was not able to get participants from Kroc School of Peace Studies and Cyber Security Engineering. I was also not able to get participants that identified as international students. The main reason was finding a common time to meet for a focus group since graduate students have numerous commitments and are on campus at different times of the day. My data sample of six students was small and not representative of all graduate and law students' experience at USD. However, my intention was to engage in conversation with graduate and law students who are involved in community-building at USD and (a) gain perspectives on their onboarding experience and (b) reflect on how graduate and law students can get involved in onboarding processes in the future.

Pre-Cycle: Pre-Existing Data

Plan and Act

While I personally knew from attending orientations as a student and as a graduate assistant that incoming students were receiving information from Graduate Student Life in various capacities, I compiled the orientation data that I had been recording to examine what the data illustrates. At the end of the first couple weeks of orientation, I reached out to each administrator who my supervisor and I had been in contact with in order to ask for the number of students that attended orientation. From spring 2018, I recorded the format in which we presented our information to keep track of which students received our information in depth and which did not.

Evaluate

Every fall and spring, Graduate Student Life is contacted by administrators from various academic programs to take part in their orientation sessions. This is the first point of contact for new incoming students and Graduate Student Life.

Table 4

Fall 2017 Graduate Student Orientation

Academic program/Office	Attendees
MEPN (HSN)	65
Business International (OISS)	50
LLM (Law)	18
JD (Law)	246
MBA (SB)	40
Law International (OISS)	18
Non-Law/Business International (OISS)	27
Peace and Justice (KSPS)	41
SOLES International	12
Social Innovation (KSPS)	21
Dean's Welcome Address Tabling (SB)	75
New Student Orientation (HSN)	95
SOLES Welcome Reception	222
CAS Reception	-

Total: 930 (including overlap) out of 1,272 new fall entrance

Table 5

Spring 2018 Graduate Student Orientation

Academic program/Office	Attendees	Format
Cyber Security Engineering (PCE)	7	PowerPoint
Professional MBA (SB)	15	PowerPoint
New Student Orientation (HSN)	15	PowerPoint
OISS	5	PowerPoint

Total: 42

Table 6

Fall 2018 Graduate Student Orientation

Academic program/Office	Attendees	Format
MEPN (HSN)	60	15 min. PP
Business International (OISS)	32	10 min. PP
LLM (Law)	35	5 min. Speech
JD (Law)	240	5 min. Speech
MBA (SB)	41	30 min. PP
Law International (OISS)	24	10 min. PP
Peace and Justice (KSPS)	45	5 min. Speech
Cyber Security Engineering (PCE)	14	15 min. PP
International Relations (CAS)	20	15 min. PP
Resource Fair (SB)	75-100	Tabling
Non-Law/Business International	23	15 min. PP
New Student Orientation (HSN)	110	20 min. PP
SOLES Welcome Reception	75-100	Tabling
CAS Reception	40-50	Meet & Greet

Total: 894 (overlap) out of 1,360 new fall entrance

Table 7

Spring 2019 Graduate Student Orientation

Academic program	Attendees	Format
LLM (Law)	12	5 min. PowerPoint
New Student Orientation (HSN)	7	15 min. PowerPoint
Cyber Security Engineering (PCE)	-	PowerPoint

Total: 19

The attendee numbers for SOLES and the School of Business receptions and resource

fairs are unreliable since Graduate Student Life, along with other campus offices, tabled at

these events. For example, while it was estimated that 75-100 students attended the School of

Business Resource Fair in fall 2018, realistically we were only able to talk to 15-20 students that approached our table.

The data shows that for some academic programs, we have 15, sometimes 30 minutes to give an in-depth presentation to students with time left for engaging students via Q&A and giveaways. For other programs in which we only have 5 minutes or when it is a tabling event, we do not have the opportunity to provide in-depth information and engage with students.

Reflect

The data reflects the reality that Graduate Student Life is not reaching every incoming student for various reasons: we are invited to participate at orientation sessions and so we are not in contact with all academic programs; some programs are predominantly or completely online-based; and some students simply did not attend their orientation. The graduate and law population encompass students with a wide range of ages, experiences, and work and family commitments that student life information may not be applicable or a priority to some students. The data also illustrates the discrepancy in how information is shared at orientation. In sessions where we are given 30 minutes, students receive thorough information and we are able to engage students in quizzes and giveaways whereas with tabling, we are only reaching a selected group of students who decide to approach our table.

Cycle 1: Focus group with Graduate Student Council Executive Board

Plan and Act

Friedlander's (2015) action research highlighted the importance of student leaders and their impact on the graduate student experience at USD. I completely agree with this statement since the role of co-advisor to the Graduate Student Council (GSC) comes with the role of graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life. A big component of my job is to advise the executive board members of the GSC in coordinating monthly meetings, events, and initiatives for graduate and law students both on and off campus. I decided to conduct a focus

group with the GSC in my first cycle because we recently had a retreat where we set goals

and ideas for the academic year and one of my main intentions for this action research was to

integrate the efforts of the GSC and student leaders in the onboarding process.

All three of the executive student leaders participated in my study. Table 8 provides

an overview of what academic program/school they are in.

Table 8

Participant Information

Name	Academic program
Maria	Higher Education Leadership (SOLES)
Linda	Higher Education Leadership (SOLES)
Alice	Higher Education Leadership (SOLES)

First and foremost, it is important to note that all three student leaders are in the same

academic program. However, this outcome was not intentional as two of three students went

through an election process. While the homogeneity may contribute to a lack of variety in

perspectives from different programs and schools, it was also interesting to hear the

perspectives of students who are higher education practitioners and what lens they bring to

their responses.

Evaluate

In all of my cycles, I asked the same question regarding what the term "onboarding"

means to the participants (Appendix A-C). I assumed that all three participants were familiar

with the term as higher education practitioners, and their responses indeed aligned with the

general definition of onboarding. They shared technical definitions such as: transitioning,

resources, official introduction, and acquainted. However, when the participants were asked

to share about their personal experience of onboarding as incoming graduate students at

USD, they revealed one that was marked with confusion and disconnect.

Confusion

While the participants had a difficult time recalling what they exactly did in the onboarding process, they did remember how they felt about it. Maria's response captured this sentiment:

I feel like there were so many things I feel like I needed to go to… yeah I don't remember but I know I was here… so confusion and it being cloudy like not really remembering direct things that would have helped me… just feeling like there's still a lot of unanswered questions.

The confusion not only emerged from the participants' experience but from what the term "onboarding" entailed. Alice shared,

I was gonna talk about not the orientation but the welcome visit or the admitted students thing in the Spring and I think that's where my confusion comes into like onboarding is it like work that you're doing even before you officially accepted a role or to attend a school or is it even work that's done beforehand?

Disconnect

The participants shared that through their onboarding experience, they felt disconnected from not only other students but from the information that was provided to them. Linda shared that there was limited opportunity at orientation to connect with graduate students outside of her program, "I remember being like, it was just very centered in the school, like SOLES, I never got to interact with other grad students and get to know that community until Grad Life. Alice added, "I remember just sticking with people I already knew… even within the school there wasn't much interaction." Maria shared, "I just didn't feel connected, it felt like high school all over again… it's also information overload to the point like you dump… you get it and you dump… completely didn't remember anything after that." Interestingly, Linda experienced her connection outside of the

formal onboarding process. Linda shared that her "onboarding" stemmed from her socialization into her graduate assistantship role:

> It was an ongoing process like onboarding with myself and with people around me in my position and in my job because there's been a lot of people that graduated from my program and they offered me a lot of resources and ideas of what classes to take and things that I should be doing… and so I felt supported in that way but that's not a formal way…

The participants' experience of onboarding mainly referred to orientation, which speaks to the significance of orientation but also to the absence of other components, which essentially points to the lack of onboarding. In the next sections, I will discuss (a) mentorships and connections as contributing factors in the participants' decision to pursue an executive position of the GSC, and (b) ways in which GSC can get involved in the onboarding process to create a strong graduate student community.

Mentorships and Seeking Connections

Two of the participants went through a formal process to be elected in their current positions and the other participant went through an interview process for the position. The reason for serving as graduate student leaders in this capacity arose from their need for connecting with other students. Linda shared, "I wanted to have more of a closeness with the graduate students… I wanted to know more about people in Law, Business, Nursing." Alice added, "I wanted to get more involved and meet new people… I felt that being on the board would be a great way to not only serve but to be able to interact and connect with other people." For two of the participants, their introduction to consider running for an elected position arose from their relationships with mentors and students already involved in student government and student organizations. Linda shared, "Knowing mentors in executive

positions and seeing what they got out of it and we had same connections and purpose which made me want to…" Finally, Maria shared,

> I was approached by the [organization] president at the time to become involved and I ended up being the GSC rep… talked to one of the E-board members at the time and it was like you know yeah you should do it and then also taking a look at the board members at the time thinking about upward mobility.

Advocacy and Community

A few of the core purposes of the Graduate Student Council is to advocate for graduate student issues and to build and maintain a strong USD graduate student community. The participants engaged in conversation around advocating for graduate students' needs and creating a stronger graduate student community. Maria shared,

> Every time I'm in some time of space they would solely focus on undergrads and I'm like what about us we exist here too and we're also paying expensive tuition and are essentially more valuable than undergrads because we're literally working right hand in hand with you sooner and have more life experience for the most part.

The participants brainstormed how the Graduate Student Council can get involved early on in the academic year to provide incoming students with information and increase the visibility of the graduate student community. The participants stressed the importance of student-led initiatives in engaging incoming and current graduate students. Alice shared, "I think it's more powerful if it comes from students, not from admin and staff telling you this is what we have… but actually seeing it and being able to interact."

This prompted Linda to raise an idea:

> I'm also curious if this is a very big goal… but like an Alcala Bazaar for grad students? Because I think most of that is undergrads and that can be in the evening too

I don't know, have all the schools be together and do something where we can all go and interact.

Reflect

This focus group in particular was interesting because the participants wore the higher education practitioner hat when defining onboarding but their actual experience as graduate students at USD was very different from their given definitions. While there was conversation around admitted and student visit days, much of the conversation was centered on orientation. The disconnect that the participants felt at their orientation is very telling when looking at the reasons why they ran for an executive position of the GSC.

Initially, I was worried that since we had just completed the retreat, the participants may either repeat the same information or not be as open to sharing ideas. However, the suggestion of a graduate version of the Alcala Bazaar was an idea that did not emerge in the retreat prior to the focus group. All three participants agreed that this was a great idea and wondered why it did not come up at the retreat. The questions I asked in the focus group could have prompted this idea since the conversation required reflection on building a strong graduate community at the beginning of the academic year, while the retreat focused on what the GSC could do for the rest of the academic year.

Cycle 2: One-on-One Interviews with Administrators

Plan and Act

I decided to reach out to administrators with whom I already had contact through orientation in the fall and spring. The administrators' willingness to participate in my study expressed to me that they were interested in exploring this topic. I met each participant at their office for a one-on-one interview and I approached these with an open mind to learn something new about the ways in which each school operates. I met with administrators from the following academic programs/schools and office: MBA (School of Business), School of

Nursing, Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), Kroc School of Peace Studies,

Cyber Security Engineering (Professional and Continuing Education), JD (School of Law),

LLM (School of Law), and School of Leadership and Education Sciences. Eight

administrators agreed to participate in my study, which is a close representation of what

Graduate Student Life's current participation in each school/program's orientation looks like.

Evaluate

For this cycle, each participants' definition of onboarding was crucial to examine

because for many participants, it informed and/or reflected the existing components of the

onboarding process for their academic program.

What and When is Onboarding?

The participants' technical definitions of onboarding were complementary to those

mentioned in Cycle 1: acclimation, adjustment, familiarity, and navigation. However, the

participants' responses from an administrative perspective varied in terms of timeline (See

Table 10). Their responses revealed a connection between their academic program or office's

timeline and their practices. For example, MBA shared their definition of onboarding as "the

moment that the student is accepted to a program through graduation." Their onboarding

begins in the summer in which students are given access to a Blackboard information center

course that is available until graduation. This includes information on general items like

navigating Blackboard, ID cards, and orientation details as well as an online platform where

students can introduce themselves and talk to each other prior to coming to USD. For Peace

and Justice where orientation signals the end of onboarding, they host numerous webinars

and conduct email correspondence with students during the summer and end with an

extensive 2-week orientation.

Table 9

Participants' definition of Onboarding

Academic program/Office	Start	End
MBA (SB)	When a student is admitted	Graduation
OISS	When a student is confirmed	1st semester
LLM (Law)	Orientation	Orientation
CSE (PCE)	Not defined	Not defined
JD (Law)	Orientation	Orientation
Peace and Justice (KSPS)	When a student is confirmed	Orientation
Nursing (HSN)	Orientation	Orientation
SOLES	When a student submits their application	First day in class

Participants approached defining this term in various ways. SOLES and PCE defined onboarding from an admissions perspective. The SOLES administrator shared, "I think onboarding is extremely important from an admissions perspective… starts from the time someone submits their application… I use the term, how do you keep a student "warm" and keep them engaged." PCE shared that onboarding occurs even before a student submits their application, "In my personal opinion, it starts from a time that a student decides they want to apply to a university… their first contact with any kind of university representation." Nursing shared that "onboarding" is a restrictive term and it comes off as exclusive and not friendly. Instead, Nursing defined it as "orientation" and welcoming students to campus and introducing all the opportunities that are available to enhance students' experience.

Graduate Student Life has been invited (back) to these orientation sessions every year and the next section discusses why that is and the significance of Graduate Student Life as a resource for incoming students regardless of what school or academic program they are in.

Why Graduate Student Life?

At orientation, students are exposed to a variety of information from not only their academic program but from numerous campus partners. The participants shared community and support as reasons why they invite Graduate Student Life to speak at their orientation sessions. OISS shared,

> I think it can be very challenging to one's identity to be thrust into this situation…
> that's why I think the idea of being able to hang out at the Grad Law Commons and
> meet people and eventually even work there…programming in our office and your
> office, it provides opportunities for students who are vulnerable, feeling lost,
> homesick…

LLM, whose orientation is heavily dominated by academics shared that,

> …more personal campus feel into our own orientation session to get students to
> realize that there's more beyond the walls of the law school or that LRC… there's
> other places on campus that you can get support, socialize, and do fun things.

Similarly, JD shared,

> We consider [Graduate Student Life] to be kind of a wellness resource on campus… I
> think it's important for them to have that community on campus with other graduate
> students so often times even though law students feel like they're in a bubble here, I
> have noticed more and more branching out and engaging with other graduate student
> populations on campus.

Finally, PCE shared,

> I recognize that Grad Student Life is also one of those offices that provides a bridge to
> a lot of university community resources… I wanted them to get connected to campus
> because it's another puzzle piece that helps decrease friction points in a student's
> journey.

Many participants expressed the importance of community and support in shaping graduate
students' experience at USD and identified Graduate Student Life as the representative office
to introduce those resources.

As discussed in the pre-cycle, Graduate Student Life presented in various formats at each orientation. The next section discusses the potential reason why formats differ depending on the nature of the academic program/school or the office.

Socialization to Graduate Student Role

For some academic programs, workshops or activities to socialize students into their new roles to succeed in their program is a significant and essential component of orientation. LLM shared, "during orientation we have some short courses like workshops so that they can get their feet wet as to what a real class might be like so we cover for example, exam writing skills, academic integrity, case briefing…" Similarly, MBA shared the importance of focusing on experiential components in orientation and how an enhanced collaboration with Graduate Student Life would enable them to do that:

> I know Mariann mentioned a one-day orientation but what would be even helpful is like a Grad Life video that we can integrate to our online platform so that all students view it that way rather than try to coordinate and get them to campus all at the same time… and when they're here for orientation we want to do more experiential things with them like have them write case studies instead of back to back like I'm this person I do this… so it's more impactful.

OISS echoed this and shared,

> I think it makes sense for Graduate Student Life to play an active role and actually replacing some of the content that we previously would feel responsible for… in your office there's great content already, the problem has been it's really unclear who's being exposed to those presentations… so if things were a little more standardized, that would also free our office up to focus on more essential things like immigration.

These responses revealed that in order for Graduate Student Life to be an effective partner to graduate academic programs, it is necessary for us to engage in dialogue with administrators.

First, administrators need to establish specific goals and outcomes of their programs'

orientation and communicate them to campus partners. For example, if the MBA program

states one of its outcomes as socializing students into their new role through experiential

activities, it should be shared knowledge with campus partners. This provides a foundation to

start conversations around when and how campus partners should get involved in the

onboarding process to maximize efficiency. Graduate Student Life currently receives a 30-

minute slot at MBA orientation. This time could be reduced if we were also involved in the

pre-arrival stage, which would subsequently allot more time for the MBA program to focus

on experiential activities during orientation. Furthermore, the data I gathered from various

participants illuminated the need for academic programs/schools to communicate with one

another and share their best practices and resources, which I will discuss in the next section.

What Does Onboarding Look Like in Other Schools?

Some participants across different programs/schools shared mutual challenges or were

looking to start practices that already exist in other programs/schools. For example, MBA

shared that since their program begins earlier than others, students are missing out on campus

tours, "Our students are on campus for orientation in August before the school is giving

guided tours, which is inconvenient so it would be nice to have a representative that would

actually do that." Similarly, Peace and Justice shared, "Graduate Admissions has been talking

about doing a graduate tour and I would really love it if they just do that." The lack of staff

and resources prove to be a challenge for MBA and Peace and Justice when attempting to

coordinate aspects of their onboarding process in a siloed manner. The problem with this is

that ultimately, incoming students are not presented with the resource that would assist their

transition to USD. For components of onboarding such as campus tours that are equally

beneficial to every incoming student (except online students) regardless of academic program

or school, it is more efficient for administrators and campus partners to pool their resources.

In this case, MBA and Peace and Justice could benefit from communicating with either Graduate Admissions or Graduate Student Life. Graduate Admissions could coordinate year-round campus tours, similar to those coordinated by Undergraduate Admissions. As a starting point, Graduate Admissions could reach out to SOLES and learn about their student ambassador program in which ambassadors host campus tours, since prospective and incoming graduate students would have more program-specific questions than undergraduates. While Graduate Student Life would not be able to answer program-specific questions, another option is for my office to provide general, student-life focused campus tours as part of a collaboration with academic programs during the summer.

Some participants shared the importance of integrating current students in the onboarding process, which also illuminated the need for administrators to learn about what practices other academic programs/schools are implementing and how these can serve as a model. For example, Peace and Justice focus heavily on pre-arrival and hosts a series of webinars regarding class registration and navigating USD. Peace and Justice shared that this is an area in which they can collaborate with Graduate Student Life, particularly with the graduate assistant:

> I think it would be great to have Graduate Student Life participate in those webinars… graduate student who's a GA there in your position will be perfect because you're a student leader on campus… you can talk about leadership opportunities for Kroc School students, you can talk about ways to engage with Graduate Student Life and resources available through Grad Life.

SOLES has a robust student ambassador program in which students host webinars, "Our ambassador program is a key piece of recruitment but also from an onboarding standpoint, our ambassadors do outreach… they're hosting the admitted student

webinars." Personally, as an international graduate student who is a graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life and an ambassador for MA Higher Education Leadership at SOLES, my roles are fluid and interconnected and have been extremely useful in many spaces when assisting incoming students. Peace and Justice could develop a student ambassador program or something similar so that they have a group of current students they can reach out to for webinars over the summer.

When considering these two examples, the immediate thought that emerged for me was the need for centralization of resources and information. Furthermore, a question that surfaced was why these participants were not conversing with one another. The next section discusses the challenge to collaboration and consequently, the continuation of the silos.

Culture Over Structure

One of the barriers to collaboration and creating a standardized onboarding process across all programs and schools was identified by some administrators as inconsistent program start dates. OISS shared,

I would say a theme you will hear from me is the challenge at USD is that every school does things very differently, the timing is very different, I think it's a huge issue that students arrive at different times.

JD shared,

I know ours is so much further ahead than anything that's going on around campus and I know that can be kind of challenging… I don't know if it would be helpful if we were communicating much earlier about timing and schedule and things like that.

However, besides the technical aspect of inconsistent program start dates, why aren't administrators from different schools communicating with one another and sharing information and best practices? There is an organizational difference in which the Division of Student Affairs (i.e. Graduate Student Life) operate horizontally in order to address the needs

of all students across all schools (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). However, as Kuh

(1996) posits, the siloed operation of higher education institutions occurs in various schools

and student support services within those schools that operate vertically and prioritize their

internal objectives over institutional ones (Keeling et al., 2007). To what degree does the

siloed mentality that stems from vertical organizations across schools contradict the

institutional "Culture of Care" mentality at USD? PCE shared,

> At USD the onboarding process is pretty siloed, the different departments do different
>
> things… one of the things that is difficult about collaboration at USD is that at the
>
> graduate level we are just so siloed… USD lives up to the Culture of Care mentality
>
> because again we tout that as this is one of the things that sets us apart… students
>
> need to feel that at every part of the onboarding process… every time you bounce a
>
> student around to different offices, it's a friction point for them.

What is more challenging is that the siloed way of working not only occurs across schools

but within schools as well. MBA shared,

> …the silo-ed way of working among various programs in the School of Business,
>
> I was trying to streamline it so that we move away from the silo effect where it was
>
> just one program and one person knows that information… we're trying to
>
> standardize it so that all of the orientations have the same information that we feel is
>
> valuable to all the students… we don't have a combined orientation… it would be
>
> nice to have that because there are some key people and information that all students
>
> should receive… I feel like we're siloed from the undergraduate school… we can do
>
> better.

> While there are structural barriers such as different program start dates and the nature

of different academic programs, it is possible for administrators to live out the espoused

"Culture of Care" and identify best practices to support incoming students by sharing

information and resources with one another. Thorp and Goldstein (2010) underscore the importance for institutions to focus on culture and how breaking down silos cannot simply be an item on a checklist. Cultural shift or change occurs from commitment and support from leaders throughout campus (Thorp & Goldstein, 2010) and "when the desire and impetus to collaborate emerges from shared values and a commitment to begin a process of change in service of a vision, then people will work together…" (McNair et al., 2016, p. 52). This cycle signaled the importance of administrators from each school, relevant campus partners, and those in high leadership positions to come together to establish a vision for supporting the graduate and law student population that is rooted in USD values and mission.

PCE perfectly captured the work that needs to be done, "For a university to successfully build a relationship with the students, the individuals in the university have to successfully build relationships with each other."

Reflect

I appreciated that most participants were open to collaborating and improving their onboarding practice by suggesting ideas. I felt that most participants were aware of the silo across schools (and within schools) and respected the work that happens at Graduate Student Life in creating community and providing support for graduate and law students. My findings indicated that the goal should not be to centralize every aspect of the onboarding process and structure, but to incorporate a hybrid model that respects the individual objectives and needs of each program while centralizing resources and information that would benefit incoming students regardless of their academic program. While there are structural barriers that enable the silos, I was hopeful that administrators could move toward establishing a culture of communication based on USD's culture of care.

While some graduate assistants opted to do internships or travel during the summer, I decided to continue working at Graduate Student Life. While the summer months are

relatively busy with off-campus housing and creating orientation materials, there is a lot of time in which the graduate assistant (and even the graduate student staff) can get involved in assisting various academic programs with their onboarding processes. There is room for growth for Graduate Student Life's creative capacity by producing videos that can be shared with administrators. Especially since online students are a big part of the graduate population, this would be a great way to reach them so that they are aware of resources even though they do not come to campus frequently.

Cycle 3: Focus group with Graduate and Law Students

Plan and Act

For my last cycle, I reached out to graduate and law students from each school who are student leaders on campus, engaged in Graduate Student Life and/or Graduate Student Council programs, and utilize the Graduate and Law Commons. I specifically connected with these students because I wanted to learn about their onboarding experience and examine whether that had any impact on their current involvement on campus.

While I had more students who expressed interest in participating, only six students were able to make the date and time in which the focus group was held (See Table 11). I chose to conduct the focus group at the Graduate and Law Commons since this space was conducive to creating an environment for open, free-flowing dialogue. This was also a space in which most of Graduate Student Life programs are held, especially dialogue-based programs.

Table 10

Participant Information

Name	Academic program	How did you hear about Graduate Student Life?
Stephanie	Higher Education Leadership (SOLES)	Visit day
Lia	Higher Education Leadership (SOLES)	UC/SLP Tour
Dan	JD (Law)	Orientation
Josh	International Relations (CAS)	Orientation
Alexander	MBA (SB)	Orientation
Laura	MEPN (HSN)	Orientation

Evaluate

What is Onboarding?

The word association activity in response to what onboarding means to the participants was a way to break the ice and have the participants brainstorm before engaging in conversation (Appendix D). The participants offered a range of definitions compared to the definitions provided in the first two cycles. I grouped their responses in four overarching themes:

Theme 1: Resources; information; guidance; structure; well organized; welcome. Laura from School of Nursing shared, "transition… how can you smoothly become a part of this new community" and Dan from School of Law shared, "they were preparing us for how we can serve the school… these are resources we have for you to use but they want us to do well and make us look good."

Theme 2: Long; scary; excited; new; fresh. These terms spoke to the participants' subjective onboarding experiences. While long and scary illustrated negative accounts, excited, new, and fresh illustrated more positive ones.

Theme 3: Connections; leadership development. Some participants shared that through their onboarding experience, they gained information on opportunities on leadership development and created connections with other students in their academic program. Lia

from SOLES shared, "finding yourself in the right program… all the ambassadors that were taking the time to be involved in our lives."

Theme 4: Expectations; ideals; conform. Josh from College of Arts and Sciences shared, "indoctrination, feel welcomed, live up to the challenge and you will be successful" and Dan from School of Law shared, "everyone in mine was scared… I'm sure that's what they wanted to do but they really beat into our heads that it's gonna be a lot of work."

When the participants engaged in further discussion about their onboarding experiences, it was apparent that they were mainly referring to orientation, similar to participants' responses in cycle one. I found that themes one and three were most prominent throughout the rest of the discussion, which highlighted mentorship and alumni network as positive aspects of the onboarding process and structure and lack of information flow as negative aspects of the onboarding process.

Mentorship and Alumni Network

The positive onboarding experiences that some of the participants described touched on mentorships and alumni network. These answers were program-specific for academic programs such as the MBA, JD, and International Relations, since their alumni network is well-established whereas that is not the case for other academic programs. Alexander shared, "Something that was really unique at USD is the alumni network; I know I can reach out to them before attending classes." Alexander was referring to a list of alumni on the website that he had access to before committing to his program. Josh added, "I'll second that – the alumni program is superior." Finally, Dan shared, "For Law school, they definitely talked up the alumni… they wanted us to get open to the idea that you might not get a job in San Diego." For these participants, connecting with and receiving information on alumni at the beginning of the year was more valuable to them than any other resource or information on technical aspects of their academic program.

For Lia, who is in the Higher Education Leadership program at SOLES, connecting with mentors was the highlight of her onboarding process. Lia shared, "Relationship building aspect as well, mentorships… everyone was a mentor to me, all the second years." She was referring to the mentorship program organized by students in the second year cohort, which encouraged students in both the first and second year cohorts to opt in to connect with a mentor or a mentee. This is interesting because it speaks to the impact of student-led initiatives on incoming students at the beginning of the year. While I expected to hear at least one response that stressed the importance of connecting with peers, that was not the case. However, these responses still underscored the importance of relationships through introduction to alumni and mentors.

Structure and Information Flow

While much of the conversation focused on orientation, Stephanie and Lia from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences mentioned the issue with information flow from visitation day to orientation in their academic program. Stephanie shared, "Visitation day was helpful but not orientation… it feels like there's a disconnect in how information is shared…" Lia added, "Things we went over visitation day didn't carry over to orientation day." Stephanie and Lia's responses revealed the problematic transition between certain components of onboarding and the impact that has on students' onboarding experience.

Other participants found that the structure of orientation was an issue, such as the time allotted to certain campus resources and the format in which information was delivered. Josh shared,

> Some aspects are more worthwhile than others… example of the Librarian, he spoke for like 15 minutes and none of it stuck… students when they're new are like what do I need to know right now to survive… they're not thinking about doing research project a year and a half from now on.

In response to Josh, Alexander shared, "...there's actually things that can be just put on an email… I would have liked to know the location and significance of the top five important places, like dining, campus card, Graduate Student Life, library…" It is evident from the participant responses that at the time of orientation, they are not expecting to learn about all the resources that are available to them but are seeking specific resources that will help them acclimate to USD and to their academic program at that moment in time.

Participants also spoke to the vagueness of the information they received and the need for resources to be presented in a concise manner. Stephanie shared,

Orientation went through the same information via meet and greet that I had done earlier for my program…I left feeling I wasted my time which was upsetting and annoying…I felt like it was very unprepared… there was this vague general aspect of information… give me those resources in bullet points in how I can explore them on my own.

Alexander added,

What you said triggers a good thought. What makes them vague is that you don't know to what extent you need those resources… maybe you need a ranking…for MBA, career services is number one and alumni relations is number two.

Stephanie and Alexander's responses were revealing because it speaks to the information overload and the subsequent dumping of it that Maria mentioned in Cycle 1. Students are provided with a plethora of resources and information at various stages of the onboarding process that it becomes redundant, impractical, and disengaging.

All six participants that I identified due to their regular involvement in Graduate Student Life programming and utilization of the Graduate and Law Commons mentioned that they heard about Graduate Student Life at one point during the onboarding process. Stephanie shared that she first learned about our office on visitation day; Dan, Josh,

Alexander, and Laura at their respective orientation sessions; and Lia during the tour of the University Center/Student Life Pavilion building when she first began her graduate assistantship. I was curious as to what motivates them to interact with other students at Graduate Student Life programs or visit the Graduate and Law Commons. The next section discusses factors that either encouraged or limited my participants from connecting with students outside of their academic program.

Do Graduate Students Seek Connections Outside of Their Academic Program?

The participants shared what encourages or limits them from seeking connections with students outside of their academic program. I identified three themes from their responses: cocurricular activity, academic program, and personal preference.

Cocurricular activity. Five out of six participants shared that their academic programs do not incentivize them to meet students outside of their programs. However, for Josh who is in the International Relations program at the College of Arts and Sciences, his involvement in a student organization encouraged him to branch out. Josh shared,

> In my first year, I didn't have the incentive to go out and meet people from different schools but then this year when I stepped up in the GSA position, and all of a sudden I have incentive to meet people from different programs because I need to network and see what's going on… kind of like the bridge between GSC and students in the programs.

Academic program. The nature of the participants' academic program either limited them to focus solely on academics or encouraged them to focus on networking and meeting students from various programs and schools. Laura in the School of Nursing shared,

> I'm just trying to survive academically. My focus is on my program, who can help me… in our school you need to maintain 80%, you get dropped from the program.

I'm struggling to meet people from my own program… so you're not really

concerned about people who are not in your silo.

On the other hand, for Alexander, who is in the MBA program at the School of Business,

branching out and meeting new people is highly encouraged and is embedded in the program.

He shared, "in my program, networking is the most important thing."

Personal preference. For some participants, even though there are not incentives

from their academic programs to meet other students, it was their personal preference to seek

out and connect with other students. Alexander shared, "There's also a personal aspect for

me. I'm sick of the autonomy if I go to my own subject every single day so I want the

variety, I want to learn about IVs or I just want to see something different." Dan also echoed

this by sharing,

I agree with that, there's no incentive in the law school to meet other people but for

me it's like a treat to come in here. I love people who are passionate about what

they're doing and most people are doing that at a high level… so like a basic side

conversation that I have in here, I'll still end up learning something new and I noticed

that other schools are a lot more open to having real discussions because the law

school, these are kids that came here because they want to argue.

The social aspect was one that was identified by all participants as to what keeps them

engaged in participating in Graduate Student Life programs and utilizing the Graduate and

Law Commons. Alexander mentioned, "people are an incentive to stay", Laura shared,

"asking questions to students" and Lia stated, "connecting with students I don't see on

campus" as reasons for their engagement. It was evident in participant responses that not only

do we create spaces through our programming for students to connect with each other, but the

Graduate and Law Commons presents a physical space that positively impact students'

academic lives as Dan shared, "there's something to be positive about besides let's go to the library."

However, I realized that even though the social aspect is what attracts participants to our programs and space, we also cannot ignore the reality that there are barriers that exist across schools and how students find it difficult to navigate them. Laura shared, "I find it hard sometime when you're bridging the gap between schools, the lingo, like how do you talk about certain stuff… it's easier to stay in my school where people understand me." The goal of the work that Graduate Student Life does is to bridge the gap among students from various schools and what Laura described is a reminder that we can do better in facilitating programs that allow students to cross that bridge.

Reflect

This focus group illustrated the reality of how the nature of different academic programs contribute to differences in students' priorities and intentions. However, it also illuminated students' personal preferences in meeting and connecting with people that overwrites the lack of incentives to do so from their academic programs. The data also illustrated that at the orientation stage, participants are looking for accessible, concise information and structure. Among the participants, there were various ways in which they found out about Graduate Student Life. Orientation was mentioned four times and visit day was mentioned once, which speaks to the importance of getting the information out there as early as student visit days.

At the end of the focus group, participants engaged in small talk and shared programs and events that were occurring at their specific school that are open to all graduate students but not necessarily publicized in that way. The participants mentioned that they learned a lot about events from other schools in this space, which was exciting for me to hear because my

action research turned into an opportunity in which students who had not met each other before were inviting each other to events that were happening out of their respective schools.

Recommendations

Through the eight one-on-one interviews and two focus groups I conducted, I was able to collect data to support my recommendations as well as receive suggestions directly from participants. The proposed recommendations are divided across the Graduate Student Council, administrators, and Graduate Student Life.

Graduate Student Council (GSC)

- Be proactive and intentional with events at the beginning of the academic year

    o Institutionalize the Graduate Student Organization Bazaar in the bylaws and coordinate the event in the fall and spring of each academic year.

    o Ensure that the annual Welcome Back event in the fall occurs immediately after all academic programs' orientation sessions as part of the onboarding process and coordinate with administrators to promote the event.

- Increase visibility

    o Instead of relying solely on the executive members of the GSC, invite graduate student leaders from various graduate student associations and organizations to present with Graduate Student Life at orientations.

    o Participants recommended that students in their positions should model behavior by going to events and meetings hosted by student organizations throughout the year in order to increase communication and awareness.

- Media

    o Create a video that introduces GSC and graduate student associations and organizations on campus and how incoming students can take on leadership roles and participate in events and initiatives both on and off campus. Share

this video with administrators, especially those that communicate with

incoming students over the summer months.

Administrators

- Cultivate a culture in which administrators from each academic program are meeting

  and sharing about current practices, resources, and ideas for improvement.

  o In addition, administrators should connect with relevant campus partners by

    coordinating meetings each semester.

  o In spring 2019, the Assistant Director of Graduate Student Life hosted a

    webinar on creating a sense of community with graduate students, which

    prompted discussion among administrators from various areas. Create more

    spaces like this (initiated by any administrator) that encourages collective

    learning and organic conversations.

- Data Analytics and Assessment

  o Administer a survey and identify and disaggregate data on what current

    students consider are pertinent information that should be introduced in pre-

    arrival, orientation, and in the first semester.

    ▪ Determine when and how it is appropriate for campus partners to get

      involved in certain stages of onboarding in order to avoid the

      "information dump" at orientation.

    ▪ Develop and articulate goals and outcomes of orientation and make

      these common knowledge to campus partners.

- Centralize information online and ensure that resources are available and accessible

  from pre-arrival until graduation.

- o Create one comprehensive website with information on campus resources, on-campus employment opportunities, etc. that all students regardless of their academic program can be directed to.

- o Utilize learning management system (i.e. Blackboard) to communicate with incoming students.

    - Basic information such as orientation dates and tuition payment.

    - Academic information such as course enrollment.

    - Campus resources such as up-to-date contact information of various campus partners and any media (i.e. introduction videos).

Graduate Student Life

- Assessment

    - o Assistant Director of Graduate Student Life should work with Institutional Research and Planning to administer an updated Graduate and Law Student Experience Assessment Survey to determine how important sense of community is for graduate and law students and their interests in meeting students outside of their academic program and school.

- Media

    - o Create videos for online platforms and proactively communicate these resources with administrators over the summer. These videos can serve as a supplement (and not a replacement) for Graduate Student Life to present at orientation sessions. Students should have access to these videos even though they may not come in contact with Graduate Student Life or only get a 5 minute speech at orientation.

- Videos should include: brief introduction to the graduate and law

    student population at USD, Graduate and Law Commons, off-campus

    housing, and programming and events.

- Identify "student ambassadors", those who regularly participate in

    Graduate Student Life/GSC events or utilize the Graduate and Law

    Commons and include them in the videos.

- Website
    - Redesign and host centralized information on the Graduate Student Life

        website.

Final Reflections

When I began my action research, I did not anticipate my findings to actually be implemented throughout the course of my research. In the first cycle, the idea of developing an involvement fair for graduate students emerged, and the GSC members and I set this plan in motion during intercession and held the Inaugural Graduate Student Organization Bazaar on February 12, 2019. While the objective of this bazaar was to get graduate and law students aware of the various graduate student organizations on campus, we received the support of many campus partners who offered to table at the bazaar on short notice. I think it is powerful to have student-led events like this in the onboarding process to expose both incoming and current students to the graduate community at USD.

I also did not anticipate the institutional changes that occurred, which gave Graduate Student Life more support and visibility. I initially developed my action research with the intent to increase collaboration between Graduate Student Life and administrators from different schools. However, through my research, I found that there is a great need for administrators and campus partners to connect with each other. In order for USD to become

more "graduate-student-ready," Graduate Student Life can definitely take the lead in creating spaces that facilitate conversations and relationship-building among administrators and staff.

I am hopeful that some of my recommendations will be taken up as early as summer 2019 by the Graduate Student Council and Graduate Student Life, in an effort to reach out to incoming students before they come to campus. Cultivating a culture of communication among administrators based on shared vision and values is crucial in challenging the siloed ways of working. It is also important to note that collaboration should not occur for collaboration's sake – administrators should evaluate their current practices and ideas for improvement and determine whether a collaboration with certain campus partners and students is appropriate.

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Appendix A

Graduate Student Council Executive Members Focus Group Script

Hello! Welcome and thank you all for being here today. The purpose for this focus group is for me to collect data on how the current onboarding process can be refined to be more student-life focused. There are consent forms in front of you, please take a moment to review them. This focus group will take no more than 60 minutes. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Activity: Word association
- There will be a piece of paper and pen in front of each individual
- Individuals will be asked to write down words or phrases when the researcher asks, "what is onboarding?"

For the rest of our time together, I would like to engage with you all in dialogue around these guiding questions:
1. What is the purpose of onboarding?
2. What were your onboarding experiences like?
3. What prompted you to get involved in Graduate Student Council at the executive level?
4. How could Graduate Student Council get involved in the onboarding process?
5. How is this team going to address building a stronger graduate community?

Thank you for participating in this focus group today. If you have any questions or concerns, you can e-mail or talk to me after at any time.

Appendix B

One-on-One Interview with Administrators Script

Hello, my name is Yuri Kwak and I am a graduate student in the Higher Education Leadership Program in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. There will be six questions in this interview. I ask that you respond to them as open and honestly as you can; if you do not feel comfortable answering the questions, please let me know and we can move onto another question.

1. What is the purpose of onboarding for graduate students?
2. What components entail onboarding?
3. What information do you think is crucial to communicate to students during onboarding?
4. What prompted you to contact Graduate Student Life to participate in (program) orientation?
5. Are there any areas of improvement you see in the current onboarding process?
6. How can your department collaborate with Graduate Student Life?

Thank you for participating in this interview today. If you have any questions or concerns, you can e-mail or talk to me after at any time.

Appendix C

Graduate and Law Students Focus Group Script

Hello! Welcome and thank you all for being here today. The purpose for this focus group is for me to collect data and research on how the current onboarding process can be refined to be more student-life focused. There are consent forms in front of you, please take a moment to review them. This focus group will take no more than 60 minutes. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Before we begin, we will go around the room and introduce our name and which program/school we are in.

Activity: Word association
- There will be a piece of paper on the wall and pens to write with for each individual
- Individuals will be asked to write words or phrases when the researcher asks, "what is onboarding?"

We will engage in dialogue around these questions:

On-boarding
1. What is the purpose of onboarding?
2. What were your positive onboarding experiences?
3. What were your negative onboarding experiences?

Orientation
4. What prompted you to attend orientation?
5. What were you looking to get out of orientation?
6. To what extend was orientation an opportunity to meet other students?

Graduate Student Life
7. How important is it to meet other students across various programs and schools?
8. How did you hear about Graduate Student Life?
9. Why do you utilize the Graduate and Law Commons and attend Graduate Student Life programs?

Thank you for participating in this focus group today. If you have any questions or concerns, you can e-mail or talk to me after at any time.

Appendix D

Focus Group Word Association Activity