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Moving toward Professional Self-Authorship: A Case Study of Participants in a Program for Students Pursuing Faculty Careers

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Introduction and Background

The Program for Students Pursuing Faculty Careers (PSPFC) is located on the campus of a large research university with more than 20,000 students and more than 1000 full-time faculty. The PSPFC program supports student participants through workshops, individual consultations (on both pedagogy and academic career preparation), and credit-bearing courses. The credit-bearing offerings are designed to alternate exposure to educational theory and mentored teaching practice. The mentored teaching practice operates over two courses; it begins, in the first course, with students teaching a portion of a class and culminates in the second course with students serving as instructor of record for a course in their academic discipline. The completion of the first theory course and the first mentored practice results in an intermediate certificate; the completion of the second theory course and mentored practice results in an advanced certificate. Students who complete one or both of the certificates are considered program alumni.

Throughout the program students are mentored both by a faculty member from the campus teaching and learning center, and a faculty member from their academic discipline. This system of support offers students the opportunity to be well prepared for university teaching careers.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the impact of the PSPFC on participants' beliefs, perceptions, and practices. The motivation for this study is based on the need to understand the impact of this program on participants' pathways through graduate school, their experiences teaching, and their preparation for postdoctoral positions. Baxter-Magolda (2008) describes a students' development as a shift from constructing meaning based on external authorities (e.g., an instructor) to constructing meaning based one's internal authority. During the graduate school experience, the students craft an internal identity within their discipline, as they critically analyze external perspectives to make knowledge claims about their research. As participants of the PFF program, the graduate

students self-select to engage in a learning environment that introduces them to new ways of thinking about education and new avenues for their future career pathway. Thus, from a developmental perspective they are asked to reflect on their epistemological foundation in this context and consider how the course content and course activities (e.g., teaching a course as a first-time instructor-of-record) affect their own values and identity. In addition, the assignments in the courses require students to, as Baxter Magolda (2004) describes it, "genuinely take others' perspectives into account without being consumed by them" as they examine alternative career pathways (p. 8). Thus, Baxter-Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship will provide a structure to consider students' experiences within the program to prepare future faculty, how they have been affected by those experiences, and the extent to which making sense of those experiences affects (or affected) their perceptions, intentions, and actions.
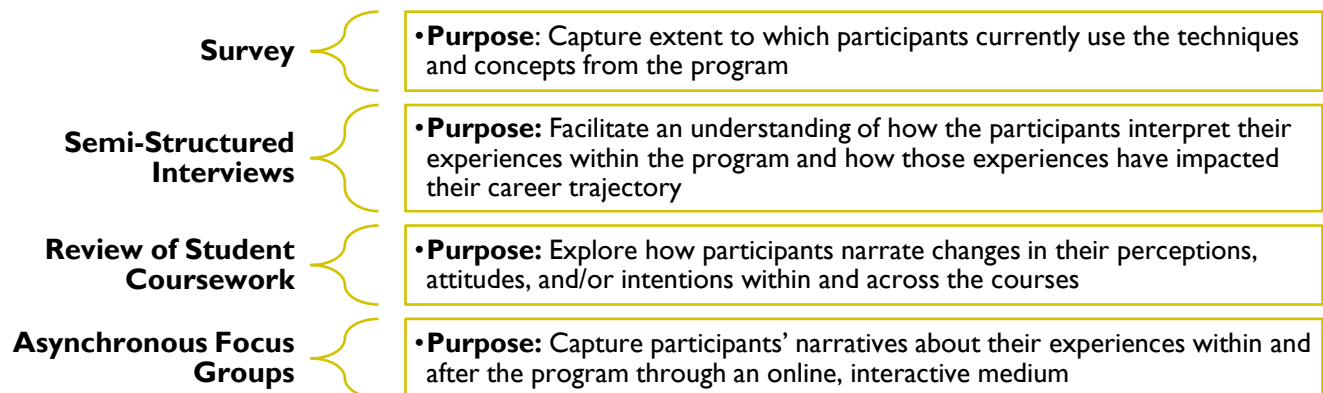
Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a program at a state-sponsored research university on participants' perspectives and practices through the following research questions:

1. How do students narrate their experiences in the Program for Students Pursuing Faculty Careers (PSPFC)?

2. How do students describe the role of the Program for Students Pursuing Faculty Careers (PSPFC) in their movement toward professional self-authorship?

Methods

The case study methodology used included multiple sources of data collected concurrently.

Survey	• **Purpose**: Capture extent to which participants currently use the techniques and concepts from the program
Semi-Structured Interviews	• **Purpose:** Facilitate an understanding of how the participants interpret their experiences within the program and how those experiences have impacted their career trajectory
Review of Student Coursework	• **Purpose:** Explore how participants narrate changes in their perceptions, attitudes, and/or intentions within and across the courses
Asynchronous Focus Groups	• **Purpose:** Capture participants' narratives about their experiences within and after the program through an online, interactive medium

Open and axial coding methods, adapted from grounded theory, are currently being used to uncover themes within and across the data sources.

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Preliminary Results – Survey

The survey sample was comprised of 33 program alumni (51% of the total sample). The composition of the sample aligned with the study population pool based on current position (student vs. university alumni), university degree program, and participation in the different program components.

Teaching Experiences

All of the study participants had received at least one of two certificates offered by the program. From the survey, this sample reported involvement in additional teaching experiences outside of those offered by the program:

- 33% participated in a department-specific teaching practicum.
- 12% have served as co-instructors for a course
- 27% have served as instructor-of-record for a course
- 21% have been TAs
- 15% noted having guest lecture opportunities

Levels of Use

The survey included an adaptation of Hall's (1975) Levels of Use framework to capture the extent to which participants use the techniques and concepts from the program currently.

- 30% of participants reported that they **plan to integrate** these techniques and concepts in their next teaching opportunity
- 18% indicated that they not only use techniques learned from the program, but also **collaborate with colleagues** to learn new techniques and further improve student learning
- 15% reported **incorporating techniques and concepts routinely** in their courses and lessons
- No participants reported **nonuse**

Preliminary Findings from Interview Data

The overarching findings from the data suggest that the process toward self-authorship related to teaching professional development is both interrupted and facilitated by the following categories; raw data are provided to exemplify each category.

1. Support given or withheld by faculty in the student's academic department

   - *Our department isn't good about telling the grad students that, one, that [the teaching center] is here as a support for the grad student instructors or really pushing, even just information about the program at all.*

   - *[My advisor] wants us to improve ourselves, teaching as if she is very encouraging. Our entire department is not like that.*

2. Support given or withheld by the student's faculty advisor

   - *I am very lucky that my adviser is very encouraging for teaching.*

   - *If their advisor isn't as supportive then seeking out another person in the department who is traditionally more supportive of the program to kind of help talk them through what would happen, what other students have experienced.*

3. Personal qualities, attitudes and developmental stage of the student that impact their:

   a. Level of confidence

      - *I also wasn't as confident and so sometimes when they would ask me questions instead of either telling them the truth, let me just get back to you, I don't know the answer, I would sometimes stumble around on my response or maybe I knew the response but they were questioning me back which is a normal student response when you're telling them they're wrong and then I would kind of let them know and let them walk all over me so it goes back into that gaining more confidence as I go through.*

   b. Predisposition to a teaching career

      - *Well in high school and actually a friend of mine, we didn't go to the same high school, we went to the same martial arts school and we both became instructors and we learned to kind of teach and interact with people in that way.*

   c. Motivation to participate in the program

      i. personal and professional growth

         - *I guess when I first went into it it was just to learn more about teaching and learning*

         - *That was when I heard about the Tech to Teaching program, for if you wanted a career that would have some kind of emphasis on education or if you wanted more resources on teaching.*

         - *but it's definitely worth doing it because if your career is going to be in Academia, you will have to teach one way or another, especially when you start up so it's better to have that kind of experience now where you have the opportunity to "mess up" and the consequences aren't as great. And then when you move on to your academic career it will be a little easier, you know what to expect.*

      ii. desire to "check a box"

      - These are all the background, this is why I'm doing it so it's not just that I have an extra two or three credits on my transcript but I can go to my department here and say, "Oh no look, I can use this as a minor". I'm getting credits in it and I can take that piece of paper when I'm applying for jobs and say, "Oh look, I have a certificate".

  d. Willingness to pursue a road less travelled

    - that there are career opportunities out there that I think a lot of people, they just don't know about them. Expanding your horizons is always a good thing especially ..

    - Now, my job search is more focused on where I can be a professor that's mostly teaching with some research, rather than a 50-50.

    - I started at Georgia Tech as an undergraduate in 2004 and I didn't really have much plan. I figure it's just the industry to go and work as an engineer and then I went in to the master's program here at Tech and dove a little bit deeper into more things a little bit outside of engineering.

  e. Openness to ideas about teaching that are unfamiliar or contradictory to departmental norms

      - Then during the practicum and during the immersion gave me the hands-on experience to really try out those things and see does this really work, is this really something that I want to do. And I think it really did just reinforce the fact that I do want to teach and ideally at the higher ed academic setting.

      - Having that push to talk to people about what their academic job search looked like and what the environment is like at other schools that are more teaching focused was really useful.

4. Peer Support

  a. To enroll in the program (move in)

      - Everybody is open and talking and we're doing gallery walks the first day, that was a huge transition in my academic career that I've never experienced that in any of my classes ever

  b. To remain in the program (move through)

      - I'm going to have to have a serious conversation with my adviser about the possibility of that.

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Significance

The results of this study will assist program administration in understanding how to design and support graduate student development related to careers as university faculty. This development is examined in conjunction with discipline-specific graduate studies

- **Continual improvement** of this and similar programs

- Complement research examining the **role of self-authorship in future faculty development**

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