

The Vermont Connection

Volume 33 *Liberating the Learner: Unpacking Access and Privilege in Higher Education*

Article 9

January 2012

Graduate Colleague Mentorship: Meaningful Connections for Emerging Women in Student Affairs

Sarah E. Hoffert

Kailee Brickner-McDonald

Cait Bjellquist

Kristin Lang

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>

 Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoffert, Sarah E.; Brickner-McDonald, Kailee; Bjellquist, Cait; and Lang, Kristin (2012) "Graduate Colleague Mentorship: Meaningful Connections for Emerging Women in Student Affairs," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 33, Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol33/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

Graduate Colleague Mentorship: Meaningful Connections for Emerging Women in Student Affairs

Sarah E. Hoffert, Kailee Brickner-McDonald,
Cait Bjellquist, & Kristin Lang

The Vermont Connection, at its core, is about people who invest in people. As aspiring and practicing student affairs educators, we invest in ourselves, in our students, in our colleagues, and in our research—research that frequently centers on the relationships among these groups of people. We invest because we grew from relationships with those who cared enough to do the same for us. We are the product of myriad connections across time and landscapes, knit together in our common experience in the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program. Intentional connection building is the purpose of HESA's Graduate Colleague (GC) program, where incoming first-year students are matched with second-year students to assist in the transition to Vermont, the University, and HESA. In the following article, five generations of GCs discuss, through the lens of feminist theory, how our special connection informed and shaped each of our academic experiences, professional development, and voice-finding processes.

The University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) graduate program has paired incoming first-year students with current second-year students through the graduate colleague (GC) program for over 20

Sarah E. Hoffert received her B.A. in Sociology with a concentration in Family Sociology in 2004 from Otterbein University in Westerville, O.H. and her M.Ed. from the University of Vermont's HESA program in 2008. Sarah currently serves as the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Outreach Specialist at Lund Family Center in Burlington, VT. Kailee Brickner-McDonald received a B.A. in History and Sociology from William and Mary in 2006 and graduated from HESA in 2010. Currently Kailee enjoys working at UVM as the Program Coordinator for the Dewey House for Civic Engagement Residential Learning Community. Cait Bjellquist received her B.F.A. in Painting from Arcadia University in 2009 and her M.Ed. from the University of Vermont's HESA program in 2011. Cait is currently working as a Residence Hall Director for Long Island University's Post Campus. Kristin Lang graduated from the University of Iowa in 2008 with a B.A. in Theatre Arts and English and a minor in Women's Studies. She is currently a second-year student in the HESA program where she serves as the Graduate Assistant for Greek Life. They would like to dedicate this article to Adam-Jon Aparicio, Laurel Dreher, and Mathew J. L. Shepard.

years. The GC role varies with each year and relationship. For many, a GC is someone who eases the transition, shares common social identities, and has the potential to become a mentor and friend. In this article, five generations of GCs discuss the significance of these overlapping relationships for themselves and for the field of student affairs. We begin this article by sharing our individual experiences with our GCs from 2006-2012.

Sarah: My GC, Adam-Jon, and I had an instant connection; his personality and sense of humor put me at ease during interview weekend and when I joined the HESA program in the fall of 2006, we connected at gatherings and downtown in big groups. I met Laurel, a fellow North Carolinian, at the next interview weekend, and I knew if we were lucky enough for Laurel to join The Vermont Connection then I wanted her to be my GC.

I enjoyed the casual relationship Adam-Jon and I had but wanted something different for my relationship with Laurel. My first year in HESA was tremendously challenging; within the first three weeks of graduate school I lost two important people in my life. Being far away from all of my family, friends, and my partner, I was overwhelmed and embarrassed for needing help and favors so quickly into my new friendships. I sheepishly asked for early morning rides to the airport and promised I'd pay back the favors double-fold. I wanted to be adamantly clear to my new GC that she could call me for anything, even painfully early rides to the airport.

What I've never told Laurel is that she gave me purpose outside of myself in HESA. When I asked about how her classes were going, it was a reminder to reflect on my own academic experience. When I asked about how she was taking care of herself, it was a reminder to pursue balance in my own life. She reminded me that it was okay to be human and to have needs outside of the program. She also kept me connected to my home state in ways I didn't know would be so important. Perhaps selfishly, she reminded me to be kind to myself.

Kailee: When I came to UVM for interview days I remember connecting with both Laurel and Sarah. Sarah interviewed me for her Graduate Assistantship (GA) position, which I ultimately filled, and Laurel knew one of my best friends from college. Once paired as GCs, Laurel continued as my lifeline into what to expect with my transition. In looking over emails, I see the range of concrete support Laurel provided. Responding to a question of where to start on a paper, Laurel responded with two articles, cheers of encouragement, and a lunch date suggestion. Over meals or ice cream, we built a comfort and trust in which I could share more than academic and work concerns.

In my assistantship, Laurel was the only second-year GA among the five in that

office. Laurel continued to be my go-to person. In staff meetings, she modeled what GA engagement could look like. When Laurel asked me how life was going, I knew I could be honest because she meant it. Her regular question: “So what are you doing to take care of yourself?” helped me reflect meaningfully. I benefited from being part of her comprehensive exam committee, where she inspired me to find a “comps” topic and style that reflected who I was. I still gain insight from seeing the intersections of our professional and personal journeys.

When interview days arrived I got to host Cait. We connected easily over our New Jersey roots. I found myself surprised to feel like an expert in topics such as the HESA program’s approach to social justice and essential Vermont footwear. When it came time to select a GC, I knew I could relate to Cait. Over the summer I started answering Cait’s questions about logistics, just as Laurel had done with me. To my delight, Cait also became my neighbor. Lunches started and our conversations about her concerns started to remind me of my own. Our relationship continued to connect the professional and the personal. I adopted the inquiries on balance and self-care I’d learned from my GC. Our connection grew over meals, meeting over the holidays at home, and even sewing Halloween costumes together.

Cait: It’s hard to imagine life without the GC Program. At this moment, a home-made CD from Kailee sits in my CD player, made to get me through my few unemployed months. During my interview days, surrounded by incredibly talented people, Kailee sat down next to me when I was feeling out of place. She said she was from New Jersey, and I became velcro. When I received an email saying she was my GC, it was the icing on my “I’m going to UVM HESA!” cake. Kailee scheduled lunches quickly and had flowers waiting to be hand delivered to my new apartment, which was conveniently located across the street from her own. From the very beginning, our GC pairing was based on small acts of kindness that built the foundation needed to meet the academic, social, and professional challenges in HESA. “What are you doing to take care of yourself?” started every lunch/dinner/meet up. I was blessed to have Kailee in Vermont during my second year of HESA as well. Conversations that had originally been filled with questions about classes, professors, and the logistics of living in Burlington morphed into how to meet the demands of a job search, comprehensive paper research, and making sense of complicated relationships.

The enthusiasm Kailee gave me for the GC Program turned me into an eager GC when Kristin and I were paired together. I knew sending her a “Happy Birthday” message and scheduling lunches for the entire school year was over the top, but I kept thinking how much I appreciated Kailee taking the initiative when I was new, knowing that without a little bit of required meeting in the beginning we’d probably lose track of one another in the busy life of a HESA grad. Our rela-

tionship was unique because though I was technically the “older” HESA, Kristin actually had a couple years on me in life and work experience; both helped stem our connection from mentor to peer to friend.

Kristin: I first learned Cait was my GC through a response to a message I had sent her about our shared apartment complex. I didn’t have a chance to connect with Cait at my interview weekend but remembered she was involved in The Vermont Connection. I immediately looked up to her as someone I aspired to be as a HESA student.

Quite possibly the same day that Cait returned to Burlington from an internship, I received 40 weeks of GC lunches on my calendar. I was amused at first but then realized the true necessity for us to have that scheduled one-on-one time together. There were weeks when things came up and we were unable to meet, but those shared lunches were an integral part of me finding a community in Burlington. Our conversations moved from getting to know one another and joking about HESA quirks to challenges with our relationships, our families, and our identity development.

I learned so much about TVC from Cait as she brought me into this line of fabulous, intelligent women. The first GC dinner at Kailee’s was a rare moment in an entirely too stressful time where I felt at peace and like I was exactly where I belonged. Reflecting on our time together in my first year, I am so grateful to continue the traditions she shared with me as my GC.

Theoretical Framework

The format and inspiration for this article is a chapter from *Empowering Women in Higher Education and Student Affairs: Theory, Research, Narratives, and Practice from Feminist Perspectives*. In the dialogue chapter, “Sister Circles: A Dialogue on the Intersections of Gender, Race, and Student Affairs,” the authors recommend professionals “promote balance and health for yourself and those you supervise” and to “make the time to mentor. Mentoring can be bidirectional—senior to junior and junior to senior” (Niskode-Dossett, Boney, Contreras Bullock, Cochran, & Kao, 2011, p. 212). These have been strong tenets of our successive and multigenerational GC relationships. The most striking element of this chapter is the authors’ use of dialogue as the ultimate authority and content, citing just one reference. We will demonstrate the power of GC relationships through our own dialogue.

As self-identified feminists, it is important to discuss the framework of feminist pedagogy to articulate our relationships. The methods we used to write this article and establish our GC connections, such as knowledge building, self-reflexivity, and finding communities of meaning, are all the product of our feminist roots.

Feminist pedagogy is a methodology to emancipate all marginalized identities, beginning with women, in education. Rooted in Freire's (1970) work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, feminist pedagogy seeks to make teachers and students (GCs in this article) partners in learning and constructing knowledge where all are "engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond [...] destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge" (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6).

There is an overwhelming critique of feminist pedagogy in that "much of feminist teaching continues to operate on the unspoken essentialist assumption that identities are stable, homogeneous and deterministic" (Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2002, p. 1). In short, essentialism dictates that the shared experience of one person's identity is considered the experience of all others who hold that identity. Essentialism undermines the very purpose of feminist pedagogy by limiting the complex interactions within a person's experiences—that we are all oppressors and oppressed. In our GC relationships we have sought to reject essentialism through what Macdonald and Sanchez-Casal (2002) call "communities of meaning" (p. 13). Rather than see our experiences purely through the lens of identity, we build communities based on what identity experiences have meant. For example, while we all share a White racial identity, how we make meaning of that identity has varied greatly. Our GC community of meaning allowed us to reflect and acknowledge where we hold dominance and critically examine our marginalized identities in new terms.

Navigating Change

Within this framework of feminist mentorship, we greatly enjoyed coming together to reflect on the meaning of our relationships. We arrived at several themes. In this first conversation, we recognized the importance of a mentoring relationship with a near-peer who has had a similar experience (HESA) but is removed from our immediate group (our own HESA cohort), and the perspective each of us gained from that connection—academically, personally, and professionally.

Cait: I remember that there was a lot going on within my cohort. We had hard conversations in our Cultural Pluralism class, and I could dialogue with my GC about things that came up for me. Having Kailee and being able to talk with Kristin helped me normalize and talk about my experiences, so when I went back the next week I had something to draw from. It felt like they were a neutral party, because they weren't there in the room; I continued to process what went on for me in a fresh way, instead of the circular thinking that happens when you only talk within your cohort.

Sarah: I was very conscious the first year that although class was a place to learn and

grow we were still being graded. There were some things I could process outside of class that helped me feel more prepared and understand my identities better. Having Laurel as another Southern White woman really helped me explore this part of myself. I'd question, "Is this my experience as a White woman, a Southerner, or both?" and Laurel really allowed me to question, make mistakes, and grow.

Kristin: HESA was a culture shift for me. I had a few, "What am I getting myself into?" moments my first months. The cohort was different from any of my classes from undergrad. It was important to have the GC relationship in my transition to help normalize my feelings and my experience. Because Cait's not in my cohort, I was able to explain my feelings more, I think, than I would have talking with someone in my cohort. That helped me get to what I was feeling and what happened to get me feeling this way.

Kailee: Yes, it was a culture shift for me too. I had been in situations when social justice was defined differently, with more focus on creating change on the systems level. And here it was more about understanding our own identities first. When Laurel talked about her exploration of identities as a White heterosexual woman she helped me see how that actually was a good place to start in social justice work.

Sarah: I felt like I had more time to reflect with my GCs in a way that was academic but explored identity too. It really was an amazing, sacred place that for me was hard to find elsewhere.

Cait: It's also in professional development—I'm finding that now. When I think about asking clarifying questions—that was a skill I gained when I was trying to make sense when explaining things to Kailee. With my current students and especially colleagues I ask things like, "I feel like I'm missing something, can you go back and explain that a little more?" That's good to have, since after two years of HESA we get used to our cohort's group dynamic, the same foundation of knowledge to work from, and that's not my experience since leaving UVM.

Sarah: Something I valued about HESA was having cohort members challenge me to be better. In my current work environment I just want to find an ally who acknowledges my identities. In classes, assistantships, or practica, we didn't talk about how radically different our future work environments could be and how to navigate them. The only place I heard that was from my GC. When I question practices or the culture of my work place it's my GC who still affirms my experience.

Cait: I don't want to be the only person who's challenging and/or thinking about what our students need. Getting this education, I gained the confidence that I'm good at what I do. And that's what people want—folks to come in and do a good job. But then I feel like I need other people like me, which is why so many HESA

graduates return to Vermont.

Exploring Connections

Our GC relationships provided a navigation base for our growth and challenges during HESA and beyond. As we spoke, we realized that this is not a universal experience, and our gender identities influenced the significance of our relationships—especially as they continue to support us beyond HESA. We also rediscovered the reciprocity of our multi-generational relationships.

Sarah: I didn't realize the role a GC could play. I thought it was surface level, a where to buy toothpaste kind of thing. I didn't envision what it could become or the power the lasting connections could have in my life. And I don't know if I would have believed it if anyone had told me.

Cait: I think it's a reflection of who we are, because other folks in my cohort didn't have this experience at all. Maybe they weren't looking for it, and we were looking for that connection and experience? I also think that we've been really intentional about how we worked with our GC since we had the GC above us show how it's valuable. I think that we all have similar warm-fuzzy feelings about our lineage—the “doer” identity is at the core of who we are, and I think that makes our GC line as strong as it is.

Sarah: I didn't feel like I got to talk about gender in my HESA experience. I was always paying attention to that piece, and we talked a little about gender identity, but otherwise gender was absent. I found I could talk to Laurel about it and say, “Wow, who's getting hired, promoted.” In my recent job search I always researched the dean, chancellor, those in power, and tried to determine if it was a place where I could move up. Our GC line is one of the few places where I felt people were open and excited to talk about gender.

Kristin: I agree, I can't remember a significant time my cohort talked about gender in the classroom. Maybe it was because women are the majority in my cohort, but then that's all the more reason to talk about it. We're mostly women in the classroom and in the field, but who has the power in the classroom or in universities? We keep hearing the male voices again and again, usually.

Cait: Numbers don't equal who's heard and who's not heard. Even if you have one man, if he's the one all listen to, then that's something that we'd talk about— how to navigate that as professionals. In terms of job searching, I remember so many conversations where Kailee would ask, “Well what is it at the end of the day that you want to be doing, and who do you want to be with?” You get so caught up in the, “How are we going to make this work in different places?” but at the end

of the day what do you want and what does it look like? If you know what you want, you'll make it happen. That was really clarifying, because I got stressed out about working with all those moving pieces.

Kailee: In my first job out of HESA, I made some financial sacrifices for the purpose and location of the position. When I was preparing for my current job, I remember talking with Sarah about how salary does matter, despite the other messages we get. I felt like I was taking a risk by negotiating. I remember her saying that the worst they can say is no— they're not going to rescind an offer! You were a solid voice, saying: "I know we're young women in the field, but go for it!" It helped me gain confidence to make it happen.

Sarah: And the interesting part is that I said that, but I still feel terrified to negotiate every time I do it. So having the experience of me saying, "You totally deserve this!" I think also helped remind myself to take my own advice. It's affirming to say it to you, and to know I need to remember it for myself as well.

Kailee: To zoom out in mentoring, you benefit from your mentor, but you learn more when you're teaching than when you're being taught... like Cait, when you were talking about me asking you about what you need for yourself, that was what I was trying to convince myself. It's me hearing my voice out there and thinking, "Yes, I do believe that. Because that's how I want someone I really care about to approach job/life stuff, and as someone I really care about, I'd like to do that too."

Sarah: What we were talking about—it's just another example of how having a GC allows you to have a place to reflect. Personally and professionally, my GC relationships provide a place for reflection more so than in any other aspect of HESA.

Kailee: Part of what makes our GC line so meaningful is that at least two of us stuck around Vermont after HESA. That can't happen all the time, but it really helped us continue to reflect.

Kristin: With Cait not living here, being intentional about this writing process is a way to continue things that connect us. Without living here, it's harder, but you can be creative about it.

Conclusion

In HESA, we speak of intentionality, especially in regard to language, curriculum, and programming. Our story is about intentionality: taking time to check in, helping bridge connections, and most importantly, listening. Our GC linkage aided all of us in navigating the HESA program, our cohorts, and our identities. Though Laurel was not able to participate in this process, we hope that her voice

and impact were realized through our writing. While it may not be the story of many, the mentorship that came from our GC connection is a part of what we take with us as we continue as student affairs practitioners, and in the end, a part of our success.

References

- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.: New York, NY.
- Macdonald, A. A. & Sanchez-Casal, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Twenty-first-century feminist classrooms: Pedagogies of identity and difference*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian.
- Niskode-Dossett, A. S., Boney, M., Contreras Bullock, L., Cochran, C., & Kao, I. (2011). Sister circles: A dialogue on the intersections of gender, race, and student affairs. In P. A. Pasque & S. E. Errington Nicholson (Eds.), *Empowering women in higher education and student affairs: Theory, research, narratives, and practice from feminist perspectives* (pp. 194-212). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Shrewsbury, C. M. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(4), 6-14.
- Weiler K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61(4), 449-475.