

PROFESSIONALS RETURNING TO DOCTORAL EDUCATION: PROFESSIONAL
IDENTITY IN THE LIMINAL SPACE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

PROFESSIONALS RETURNING TO DOCTORAL EDUCATION: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN THE LIMINAL SPACE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

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This study highlights the experiences of doctoral students who worked for at least seven years in a professional capacity before starting in graduate school full time, or “returning professionals” as they are called for the purposes of this study. Returning professionals come back to school with an established sense of professional identity, meaning that they have some level of skills and knowledge that inform their expectations of themselves. My study looked at how having an established professional identity impacted their experience of graduate school and was informed theoretically by graduate socialization, identity development and role theory. I selected twelve participants from a large Midwestern public university from a range of programs and disciplines for a qualitative inquiry using narrative-inspired semi-structured interviews and a photo-elicitation exercise. My interviews explored the following three research questions.

1. How do returning professionals experience ongoing shifts in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student as it relates to their professional identity?
2. What tensions do returning professionals experience in their role as graduate students that are informed by their existing professional identity?
3. How did returning professionals’ professional identity impact their experience of the socialization process of doctoral education?

Participants experienced the shift from being a worker to being a graduate student as existing in a liminal space. At times, the liminal space felt positive, like a break from the pressures of their previous careers and a time to invest in learning and research. At other times,

it felt like a place of uncertainty and loss, where they no longer felt confident in themselves as the professionals they once were nor as the scholars they were trying to become. Participants also felt many sources of tension, which could be meaningfully grouped into two categories: 1. *Student vs. Professional*: returning professionals felt a conflict between the expectations of being a doctoral student and their previously shaped expectations of themselves as professionals. 2. *Academy vs. Industry*: returning professionals noted a difference in the way work was done in their previous jobs and in academia and felt frustrated that the rules of their program were not spelled out like a contract as in other jobs. And finally, some participants experienced *contrasting socializations* where their previous socialization was different than but not in conflict with academia. Other participants experienced *conflicting socializations* where their previous socialization was at odds with academic socialization. Some of these participants felt that they were being asked to abandon their previous identity, and that felt very threatening to their overall sense of self.

The discussion addresses these themes, breaking down how returning professionals experienced their professional identities in the liminal space of their programs. The clash of expectations in how work should be done created an intra-role conflict for some participants that made it hard to know how to operate in the academic space. Being in a liminal space could also create a sense of dissonance depending on the type of job that a participant held previously and how cohesive their professional identity was. The study ends with implications for practice, including better orientations and mentoring that keep returning professionals in mind and more institutionalized supports to validate and equip students looking for jobs outside of academia.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Capt. Elizabeth (Betty) Hutcheson who turned 100 years old the month I defended it. She has always been a fierce advocate for women, and paved the way for my generation of women to have the opportunities we have. I would not be who I am today without her and am incredibly proud to be part of her legacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Tony's eyes had been on a PhD for a very long time. He had worked in various administrative jobs in higher education for 20 years. Most recently, he had been working with doctoral students, helping them attain their goals all while having to put his own goals on hold. He waited for many reasons. He had a family to support financially, a partner with demanding family obligations, and supervisors that were not always supportive of his desire to begin a PhD program. By the time he enrolled, he was 38. Because he had worked full-time while pursuing his Masters' degree and remembered feeling stretched too thin, he knew he wanted to focus his entire energies on obtaining his PhD. He chose to quit his job and become a full-time doctoral student.

When reflecting on his time as a doctoral student, Tony described many contrasts in his experience. At times, his advisor and other faculty expressed high degrees of confidence in his ability, citing his previous work experience as proof of his capability. However, because of their high expectations of him, they did not seem to recognize when he needed help or how to help him even when he asked. His graduate assistantship duties were to work for a faculty member who was doing the same kind of work he used to do, but when he offered his opinions on improving the program, he was rebuked. He was told, in essence, to stop thinking and operating like a professional and only to think and operate like a graduate student. He was frustrated and discouraged at times and felt caught between competing expectations: he was treated like a graduate student in some ways while being treated like a professional in others and that made it hard for him to know how to operate. What should he do when his professional self tells him to do one thing and his student self tells him to do another? He was still glad to be achieving his goal, but had to constantly remind himself of why he was in the program to overcome the

discouragement he felt, discouragement that was often grounded in his competing senses of identity as a professional and a student. He reminded himself that this degree will allow him to rise above his previous level of accomplishment and to make substantially more money. He reminded himself that he would be the first in his family to have a PhD. And he reminded himself of the many personal and professional sacrifices he has already made along the way.

I spoke with Tony as part of an unpublished pilot study for my dissertation. The stories he and other participants of that pilot study shared with me helped me shape the framework and the process that I used for my dissertation. As those participants spoke with me about their journeys to and through their doctoral programs, I resonated with much of it. I also returned to the academic world to pursue a PhD after a long stint of working professionally. I had never worked in higher education, so I arrived at my doctoral program with different expectations and different concerns than Tony did. Like Tony, however, I have also experienced many significant contrasts while in my PhD program. I also experienced a dissonance in expectations, where at times I felt recognized and rewarded for being a professional and at other times, I felt penalized for not acting enough like a graduate student.

Naming the Problem

It is increasingly common for adults to return to postsecondary education after a time of being in the workforce. Adult students, defined as students over the age of 25, comprise over 42% of postsecondary enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). That number increased 35% between 2001 and 2015 and is projected to increase an additional 11% between 2015 and 2026 (NCES, 2018). These students may have delayed entry into postsecondary education or they may have taken a “nontraditional” path into college with several alternating intervals of attending school and working. Up to this time, researchers have focused

on students enrolled in undergraduate programs, although that literature is still sparse when compared to the literature about traditional aged students (Hagedorn, 2015). There is even less literature about students who enter graduate programs after having worked professionally (Boud & Tennant, 2006; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

In order to address this gap, my study focuses on the experiences of doctoral students who have returned to graduate school after a substantial season of working professionally, a group that I am calling “returning professionals” in that they are professionals who are returning to higher education. These students have established a sense of professional identity, or who they are as workers, which informs how they conduct themselves and also contains a sense of what type of work they feel qualified to do. Not everyone’s professional identity is as strongly held or as meaningful to each individual. Some people hold one or more jobs within one field, and for them, their professional identity might feel very established because of that consistency. Some people hold jobs in multiple fields, and having a disparate career path may mean having a less established sense of professional identity. Conversely, having a more disparate career path may lead to a very established sense of professional identity because that identity was what led them to make changes in their careers. Each of these factors and more shape how each person experiences their own professional identity.

When returning professionals enter graduate school, they take their professional identities with them. Their situation is unique, as many of their peers in their graduate programs have not yet been in the workforce and have not yet had the opportunity to establish a professional identity. Others of their peers may still be working while in their programs of study and are still operating from their professional identity on a daily basis. I chose to focus on those who are no longer working full time but are fully immersed in the graduate school experience: those who are

full-time doctoral students who are funded by assistantships. Students who continue to work full time must juggle the responsibilities from both their student role and their professional role, which is certainly very challenging. I am most interested, however, in how people come to terms with *changing* from one role to another, and how people who hold a professional identity experience and navigate the tensions that arise while they embody the role of a graduate student.

Upon their entry into their programs of study, these returning professionals become full-time students once again. They are in the unique position of shifting their primary role from being a worker to being a student. Each of these roles (professional worker and graduate student) has specific expectations of how one is to present oneself and how one is positioned in relation to others. What happens when the new expectations of being a graduate student conflict with the old expectations of being a professional? Is it possible that some returning professionals do not experience this shift as a conflict? What factors affect how someone experiences this shift? How do these students maintain a connection with and continue to develop their professional identities? As one who experienced some of the tensions, I know that it can be a time of confusion, exhilaration, anxiety and freedom. Guided by these questions, informed by both my own experience and the pilot study I conducted, I set out to talk to other returning professionals, listen to their stories, and discover what insights I could about how faculty and graduate programs can better understand them and support their progress through the rigors of a doctoral program.

Definition of Terms

Returning Professional – For the purpose of this study, a returning professional is a full-time doctoral student who has worked for at least seven years after graduating from undergraduate education. They must not currently be working full-time and must be funded by some type of

university assistantship (research, teaching or administrative assistantship). These parameters make it more likely that these individuals are embedded in their experience as doctoral students and will have experienced a distinct transition from workforce to graduate education.

Professional Identity - In the field of psychology, some researchers contend that identity can be studied across specific domains, or categories, such as gender, ethnicity, or religion (Goossens, 2001, Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In higher education research, student development theories have begun studying identity development according to identity domains instead of treating identity as a singular entity (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). In my study, I focus on the identity domain of professional identity. Professional identity is broadly defined as how individuals view themselves in relation to the profession in which they work and comes largely from career development literature (Slay & Smith, 2011). Slay & Smith (2011) posited that one's professional identity is shaped by three main influences: socialization processes, career transitions, and internal redefinitions of priorities. It contains our beliefs about our capacity to contribute to our profession and what our core contribution is to the work that we are doing. In much of the graduate education literature, professional identity development is primarily concerned with preparing doctoral students for faculty roles (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013). In my study, professional identity refers to the identity that returning professionals developed while working before returning to school.

Socialization - Socialization refers to the process by which individuals gain the knowledge, abilities, norms and values of a given profession (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). Socialization in graduate education describes both the process and context in which returning professionals learn the new role of being a doctoral student. They are also possibly learning the expectations of a new discipline, if they are making a shift to a new professional field. This study focuses on

how students are socialized to become doctoral students while in their graduate programs.

Research Questions

I explored the following research questions to better understand how returning professionals experience and navigate graduate education:

1. How do returning professionals experience ongoing shifts in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student as it relates to their professional identity?
2. What tensions do returning professionals experience in their role as graduate students that are informed by their existing professional identity?
3. How did returning professionals' professional identity impact their experience of the socialization process of doctoral education?

Significance of the Study

Very little research has been done about doctoral students who worked before returning to school. The literature on returning adult learners in general has long demonstrated that they face unique obstacles to their success in graduate school in terms of financial responsibilities, more complex family obligations, and institutional barriers due to policies that were designed with traditional-aged students in mind (Cross, 1981). When looking at returning professionals in particular, some scholars argue that these students' professional experiences are not being valued and taken into account during their time in graduate school (Baker & Pifer, 2015; McAlpine, 2012). These students may experience this change in roles as a loss of status, autonomy, and confidence, losses that would affect their satisfaction in their graduate program as well as their ability to complete their degrees. They may also experience this shift in positive ways, exploring new possibilities and freedoms. In order to better support returning professionals, we need to know more about their experiences. We need to know more about how these students experience the climate of their graduate education programs and if these programs provide adequate

mechanisms of support and validation for this growing population of students. We also need to know more about the unique resources they possess and how to help them recognize and leverage those resources.

The results of this study will have implications that are relevant for several broader topics of interest. I hope to advance the work that has already been done in the field of doctoral education that takes existing professional identities into account when studying student experiences. Much of what we learn from the experiences of returning professionals may help us better understand returning adult learners who reenter formal education at other levels (e.g. undergraduate, masters, other terminal degrees, certifications). Returning adult learners are generally treated as a monolithic entity, and zeroing in on returning professionals will help delineate the research on returning adult learners. My study will help determine if there are systematic distinctions in the experiences of adults in higher education. I hope this study also provides insight into how people in major life transitions experience and adjust to shifts in their identities regardless of the context. A parent returning to work after taking years off to have a family, a worker who has been laid off and must take a job at a lower level of status, and anyone switching to a new field of work all are experiencing a shift in identities. They all have a preceding identity that will impact the way they experience the identity they take up in subsequent contexts, and that identity will influence the way they embody new roles. I hope that my study helps give language and structure to the experience of identity shifts, helping us know how to support those in our organizations who are experiencing shifts of this nature and helping us better understand and adjust to our own identity shifts. I believe this study will also surface implications about how institutions of formal education can shape, support, validate and affirm the growing numbers of students whose identities, experiences and pathways to higher education

do not fit what we expect of a traditional college student. In our world, which is increasingly a knowledge economy, we must expand our definition of what knowledge is and where it comes from. Students who return to formal education after years of experience in the workforce have valuable knowledge and skills from their experience and we all benefit when we can validate and learn from them (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Though the bidirectional influence of adult learners on institutions of higher education is beyond the scope of my dissertation, I do hope my work makes a contribution to increase the value that we ought to have for returning adult learners.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I argued for the importance of studying the population of students that I have named “returning professionals.” I described some of the key terms that I use, describing the way I understand those terms and ended with the significance of this study. In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature that is most relevant to my study. I begin by describing the literature on adults returning to formal education, highlighting what research has discovered about returning professionals. I then review doctoral student research to frame the discussion of how adult learners engage in doctoral education. The next section focuses on identity development broadly and then narrows the scope to discuss professional identity as it relates to returning professionals in doctoral programs. In the final section, I will discuss role theory, arguing that it is a helpful way to conceptualize and study the experience of returning professionals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to conduct this study, it was important that I begin by taking the time to thoroughly understand the streams of literature that were relevant to my topic. The following literature review has four main sections. In the first section, I describe the literature on adults returning to formal education, highlighting what has been studied about returning professionals. In the second section, I begin with a brief discussion of doctoral student research to frame the discussion of how researchers think about and study doctoral students. I then narrow my focus to doctoral student socialization in particular, highlighting the elements of socialization that relate to returning professionals. I also discuss the literature on how doctoral students who hold minoritized identities may experience the socialization process differentially and discuss how these identities may impact the experience of being a returning professional.

The third section focuses on professional identity development. I start with an overview of student identity development in general and then focus on professional identity in the context of graduate school. I demonstrate the different ways that professional identity is being defined and studied within the larger context of research about doctoral students. I also identify gaps in the literature and explain how my study addresses some of these gaps. In the fourth section, I finish with a discussion of role theory, arguing that it is a helpful way to conceptualize and study the experience of returning professionals.

Returning Adult Learners

The purpose of the first section of this literature review is to establish an overview of returning adult learners. The number of adults who are returning to formal education settings is higher than it has ever been in the United States, and their numbers are increasing (Hagedorn, 2015; NCES 2018). The definition of who is an adult is not as simple as it seems at first. Many

people would define an adult by the legal definition, which in the United States is a person over the age of 18. The National Center for Education Statistics has defined adults in postsecondary education as anyone aged 25 or older (NCES, 2018). In the field of adult education, however, adults are considered to be people whose “age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 8). Adulthood is a stage of life defined by accumulating complex roles such as being a partner, becoming a parent, or being a homeowner. By definition then, an adult returning to formal education is one who “*adds* the role of student onto their other often full-time roles as caretaker, worker, and citizen” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 12, italics in original). I find this latter definition to be the most fitting for my study as I am looking through the lens of roles, which I will discuss more in depth later in this literature review.

The field of adult education focuses on adult learning, which takes place in both informal and formal settings (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Informal learning covers opportunities sponsored by a variety of institutions, including things such as a professional development seminar at work, a Sunday school class at a church, and a class on photography at a community center. Formal learning, the focus of my study, covers learning for adults that is sponsored by institutions whose primary purpose is educational, such as secondary and post-secondary institutions. Adult learners participate in postsecondary education at every level, pursuing opportunities to gain certificates, associates, bachelor’s, master’s, professional and doctoral credentials. The literature primarily focuses on adults who are returning to study at the undergraduate level, which is where the bulk of returning adult learners are located (Kerns, 2006). The studies that have been done on adults returning to study at the graduate level focus on two main areas: discovering what is motivating adults to return and identifying unique barriers to their success.

Motivation

In light of the relatively recent upswing of adults returning to school, researchers have sought to understand why so many adults are seeking graduate education. Some adults are returning to change their career path (Becker & Murphy, 2009). The traditional model, especially in the United States, of having a job at one company until retirement is no longer the norm or the expectation for one's career. In light of this change in expectations, returning to school is seen as one viable means to gain entry into another field or discipline. Other adults seek graduate degrees to further careers within the same field. Take, for instance, a student affairs professional seeking to become a provost, knowing that at many institutions, a PhD is required to advance to their desired position. Others seek graduate degrees to become or remain competitive within their field, increasing their earning potential as well as their marketability (Becker & Murphy, 2009). Some adults are seeking a change for more personal reasons, such as a major life transition like a divorce or the death of a spouse (Kasworm, 2008). People in life transitions may find themselves more motivated to pursue a new degree or may be forced to pursue more education in order to support themselves and their families.

Understanding a returning professional's reason for returning helps identify resources as well as potential barriers for success. For example, returning professionals who are pursuing a graduate degree for continuing a career in their current field will likely not experience some aspects of the socialization process of their graduate program as a culture shock, as they have already been socialized as a member of that profession. They may still experience a transition in embracing some aspects of the student role, however, such as learning new technology in the classroom or navigating the academic culture of their graduate program.

Barriers to Success

Returning professionals as defined in my study share many of the barriers to success that other returning adults face. Cross (1981) identified three categories of barriers faced by adult learners: situational, institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers are those that arise out of an individual's unique situation. These include limited financial resources, time constraints, and balancing family obligations. Institutional barriers are constraints imposed on adult learners from the policies, procedures and culture of the institutions of higher education themselves. These barriers include limited or insufficient access to and awareness of resources on campus, times that classes are offered, access to parking, and access to faculty. Dispositional barriers are "those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (Cross, 1981, p. 98). These barriers could be beliefs about their ability to succeed, previous difficulties in formal academic settings, or feelings that one does not belong.

Cross's (1981) categories have most often been used to describe barriers for adult students in undergraduate programs. Shepherd and Nelson (2012), in their study of adult women returning to graduate school, found Cross's (1981) framework to be relevant for graduate students, although the researchers argued that adult graduate students may face fewer dispositional barriers than adult undergraduate students because they have already proven their ability to succeed in formal education. There is some measure of debate in the literature over returning adult learners' expectancy of success. Adults who have been out of school for many years may need additional support, for example, learning how to use digital resources, which can make them feel less likely to succeed (Hagedorn, 2015; Kasworm, 2008). There may also be unique dispositional barriers, such as the Imposter Syndrome, or the fear that they do not belong in graduate school and they will eventually be exposed as unqualified (Clance & Imes, 1978)

Most of the research on adults in graduate education does not discuss adults who are no longer working and are full-time graduate students. They are more likely to assume that these adults are also still juggling the responsibilities of a job while being in school (Hagedorn, 2015; Kasworm, 2008; Merriam & Beirema, 2014; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). The experience of returning professionals, those who are no longer working full-time, is aggregated within this larger group of returning adult learners. My work highlights returning professionals, focusing on their unique experiences within doctoral education.

Doctoral Student Research Overview

In the second section of the literature review, my goal is to establish what researchers have learned about doctoral students in general. Research on doctoral students focuses on four main areas: attrition and persistence, student experiences, programmatic interventions, and socialization (Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). Research on attrition shows that around 50% of doctoral students do not complete their degrees (King, 2008, Lovitts, 2001). The percentage changes by discipline as well as factors such as gender and race. Over a cumulative ten-year period, in a study conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools called the Ph.D. Completion Project, men were found to complete at a rate of 58%, while women completed at 55% (King, 2008). Men were more likely than women to complete in the fields of engineering, life science, and math and physical science, while the opposite was true for the social science and humanities fields (King, 2008). White students were more likely to complete at 55%, compared to 51% for Hispanic Americans, 50% for Asian Americans and 47% for African Americans (King, 2008). White students had the highest completion percentage in all fields except for math and physical science, where Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans had a slight edge. African Americans tied their White counterparts in the life sciences at 60%

each, and the life sciences field was the only field where African Americans were above 52% (King, 2008). In order to understand this high level of attrition, researchers took a closer look at the experiences of graduate students (Nesheim et al., 2006). This research has illustrated that graduate students are an incredibly diverse population of students who often have very different needs than undergraduate students: their stress levels tend to be higher than undergraduates due to a greater amount of negative life events, in part due to the different stressors that accompany later stages of life such as marriage and family responsibilities (Gardner & Barker, 2014).

Researchers have also attempted to discover what types of interventions have been successful at supporting graduate students, primarily focusing on co-curricular programs and mental health services (Nesheim et al., 2006). Researchers have also shown a great deal of interest in the role of mentor/supervisor relationships (Dericks, Thompson, Roberts, & Phua, 2019; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001) and the development of peer networks/communities of practice (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Nerad, 2012) and how these sources of support affect graduate student success outcomes. Socialization, the fourth primary area of graduate student research, has particular relevance to professional identity development, so I will consider it in greater depth in the section below.

Doctoral Student Socialization

Socialization refers to the process by which individuals gain the social knowledge and skills of a given profession (Van Maanen, 1976). In other words, it establishes the baseline expectations for how to participate successfully in a particular field, discipline or job. Those who meet the expectations are more likely to be rewarded with acceptance and the possibility for advancement, while those who do not or cannot meet the expectations will find barriers to acceptance and advancement. In the context of doctoral education, researchers have proposed

several models of socialization, the most widely advanced by Weidman, Twale, & Stein (2001). Their model proposes four stages of graduate student socialization: Anticipation, Formal, Informal, and Personal. The Anticipation stage occurs when students enter their graduate program, and is characterized by students becoming aware of expectations and norms. The Formal stage is characterized by attempts of students to meet these expectations through performing the proscribed roles and tasks. The Informal stage consists of learning from the behavioral cues of incumbent graduate students, gaining information through less official channels. Students at this stage also may experience themselves transitioning from student-only roles to more professional roles. The final stage, Personal, is characterized by students internalizing the expectations of their intended professions, a process which may have included overcoming values conflicts and conflicting self-identifications (Nesheim et al, 2006). Returning professionals enter into the socialization process of doctoral education with established expectations for how to operate in their primary environment. They have been socialized within their previous work environment, and of course, this socialization will vary widely with each individual. How do these established expectations correlate to the new expectations of graduate school? What happens when expectations conflict and for whom are they most likely to conflict? These are some of the questions my study addresses.

Weidman et al. (2001) have been criticized for creating a model that does not account for how individuals with minoritized identities may experience the socialization process (Gardner, 2008). Beginning in the 1980s, there was an increase of interest in minority students' experience of higher education starting with studies about black students at predominantly white institutions. Later in the 1980s and into the 1990s, there was a rise in studying the differential experiences of graduate students with minoritized identities. Turner and Thompson (1993) studied female

doctoral students, comparing the experiences of minority women with women from the majority culture. They found that minority women received fewer intentional socialization experiences (recruitment, apprenticeship opportunities, mentoring experiences, etc.) than majority women, demonstrating the compounding effects of being both women and minorities within graduate education (Turner & Thompson, 1993). Building on Turner and Thompson's (1993) study, Taylor and Antony (2000) studied African American doctoral students and their experiences of stereotype threat in their programs of study. Stereotype threat is the sociological theory that when one's social group is associated with a negative stereotype, such as poor academic performance, individuals who belong to that social group experience added pressure to overcome the negative expectations. Taylor and Antony (2000) found when graduate programs employed strategies consistent with "wise schooling" practices, they were able to mitigate the effects of stereotype threat on African American graduate students. They argued for using these "wise schooling" practices as a framework for improving the socialization experiences of minority students in doctoral programs.

Nettles (1990), expanding the conversation beyond black and white, studied white, Hispanic and black doctoral students¹. Nettles found that black students had the fewest opportunities for teaching or research assistantships, took out more loans, and had the greatest feelings of racial discrimination. Even when holding socioeconomic status constant, black doctoral students still were the least likely to receive fellowships or assistantships and had the least amount of interaction with faculty. Many of these results point to lower levels of engagement with faculty, where much of the formal processes of socialization take place according to Weidman, Twale, & Stein (2001). A study by Ellis (2001) comparing Black and

¹ Throughout this document, I defer to the terminology used by authors (e.g. African American vs. black vs. Black).

White men and women doctoral students also found that race strongly influenced the quality of the student-advisor relationship. Ellis (2001) also found that Black women had the lowest levels of satisfaction with their programs and felt the most isolated in their programs, having difficulty finding meaningful relationships within their doctoral communities. These studies and many others highlight the importance of faculty mentoring of graduate students who identify as women and as people of color (Montgomery, Dodson & Johnson, 2014). Gonzales' (2006) study of Latina doctoral students found that "academic socialization had a default assumption that all students fit the same mold and the prototype of the end product mirrored the characteristics of White males (p. 359). The participants in this study found many ways to resist this "undesired cultural assimilation" that was in conflict with their "culture and academic purpose."

In addition to learning more about differential student experiences, some researchers have addressed the issues of race and gender from a theoretical perspective. Sallee (2011) introduced a theory of gendered socialization, using gender performance theories to extend existing models of socialization. Sallee argued that, beyond men and women having different experiences of socialization, we need to understand the way disciplines themselves are gendered. Each discipline has different expectations for men and women and the roles they are allowed to play. These disciplinary expectations will create very different socialization experiences for men and women. Imagine the difference in the graduate program environment for a woman studying to be an English teacher (a female dominated discipline) and a woman studying to be an engineer (a male dominated discipline). Sallee acknowledged that her model does not account for subgroup experiences such as minority women or people from different socioeconomic groups (2011). Bearing that in mind, her work makes an important contribution to the understanding of how socialization itself is a gendered process. Winkle-Wagner and McCoy (2016) used the theory of

cultural capital to describe the disparities that minority students face in the socialization process, explaining that minority students may feel like they are being asked to abandon their cultural backgrounds in order to be successfully socialized as graduate students. Their study found that preparation programs, specifically summer institutes, help minority students acquire more social and cultural capital to better prepare them to navigate the socialization process successfully.

Socialization research makes many important contributions to our understanding of the graduate student experience. One of the primary contributions is a deepening understanding of how the process of being in graduate school shapes the way graduate students view themselves both as graduate students as well as future professionals. Recognition of this dynamic has led to calls for more focused inquiry into the relationship between socialization and identity (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013). Identity is not static or fixed and doctoral students continue the process of identity development throughout their graduate education (Gardner, 2009a). Gardner (2009a) identifies several reasons why understanding identity is important. To begin with, studying doctoral students through the lens of identity can shed light on attrition issues, helping us understand some of the psychosocial reasons why students are choosing to leave their programs. Research has indicated higher attrition rates for students who hold minoritized identities, specifically race and gender (Gardner, 2008; King, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). What do we observe when we disaggregate attrition data by other identity domains, such as religion, or sexual orientation? Are students leaving because they feel like who they are is at odds with what they are being asked to do or who they are being asked to become? Looking at doctoral attrition through the lens of identity may help us “understand how to best assist students through developmentally challenging periods of their educational experience” (Gardner, 2009, p. 4).

To conclude this section of the literature review, when considering the experiences of returning professionals, socialization is an important process to understand in order to explore the unique dynamics of being a doctoral student with a substantial history of work experience. The socialization process, as it dictates the roles and responsibilities ascribed to doctoral students and prepares them for their future careers, has a great impact on students' professional identity development while they are in graduate school. My study looks specifically at how students with existing professional identities experience the process of being socialized to become successful doctoral students. I do not focus on how they are being prepared for future careers except to consider the disciplinary differences that students experience in different programs. For some returning professionals, the socialization process of graduate school may confirm their professional identity, bolstering their view of their own competencies, values, and experiences, a process Van Maanen (1976) refers to as investiture. For others, the socialization process may devalue their professional identity, demanding that they reject and replace old values and expectations with new ones in order to be successful as graduate students, which Van Maanen (1976) calls divestiture. Additionally, social identities such as race, sex, class, sexual orientation, religion and ability will significantly impact how students experience socialization.

In the next section of this literature review, I explore the construct of professional identity and how it develops. I describe the current literature on graduate student professional identity development, beginning with a very brief description of student identity development research in general. I finish by defining professional identity and discuss professional identity development in the context of graduate school.

Professional Identity Development

In order to frame the discussion of professional identity development, I begin with a discussion of student identity development, as my study focuses on those who are embedded in the higher education context as students. Returning professionals have been students before and are now students again, but they come back to their student identity with a professional identity that they did not have before. Their professional identity is still intact but it is not operating the way that it did when returning professionals were actively working in their jobs. Their main identity, their activated identity, is now their student identity. It is relevant, therefore, to understand the history of and the current trends in student identity development.

Student development theories aim to explain how students “grow and develop holistically with increased complexity while enrolled in a postsecondary environment” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009, p.6). These theories draw richly from many schools of thought within psychology and sociology (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student affairs professionals have used these theories, many of which rose into prominence in the 1970s, as a foundation for their work with students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The most prevalent theories that guide the discussion of student development can be grouped under the following paradigms: social identity, psychosocial, cognitive-structural, and integrative theories (Evans et al., 2009). For the scope of this project, I will draw mainly from the psychosocial developmental paradigm. Psychosocial development theories intentionally take the life span into account, which make them most appropriate for my research since I am interested in a type of identity development that considers previous life experiences.

Student Identity Development

Today's psychosocial development theories are informed by the foundational work of Erik Erikson, James Marcia, Lawrence Kohlberg and others (Evans et al., 2009). Erikson's theory in particular has provided the foundation upon which much identity development work rests. Erikson (1968) theorized that humans go through developmental stages that occur at relatively predictable times along the chronological timeline of human growth. Development occurs through the interactions between internal factors such as biological or psychological growth and external factors such as changes in the person's environment. During each stage, there is a conflict that must be resolved in order to move successfully into the next stage. These conflicts are bimodal in nature, and the conflict that most informs my study happens in stage five: identity versus role confusion. This conflict is first encountered in adolescence (Erickson, 1968). Identity, from an Ericksonian perspective, is the integration of the roles, or selves, that people developed in earlier stages of development (Miller, 2002). Erikson's work has been critiqued for being too linear and oversimplified, and its implications for cross-cultural understanding are also limited (Evans et al., 2009). Later, more diverse voices addressed these limitations and added to the conversation such as Ruth Jossleson, Carol Gilligan, William Cross, Jean Kim and many others who included valuable insights into the development of women and racial minorities (Evans et al., 2009). The field of identity development in college students has expanded even further to include the identity domains of sexuality, ability, veteran status, and adult learners.

Graduate Student Identity Development

Compared to the amount of research on undergraduate student identity development, relatively little has been studied about graduate students (Gardner & Barker, 2014). The

literature on graduate student identity development, following the literature about undergraduates began by conceptualizing identity as a single, unified concept (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). It has now moved to a multifaceted and dynamic view of identity. Researchers have begun studying the implications of distinct identity domains such as gender identity and racial identity as they relate to graduate student experiences and outcomes (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers & Russell, 1996; Gay, 2004; Sallee, 2011, Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007; Taylor & Anthony, 2000; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). The identity domain with which my study is most concerned is professional identity. In this next section of this literature review, I will define professional identity as I am using it in this study. I will also describe how it has been studied in higher education with doctoral students.

Professional Identity

Professional identity is broadly defined as how individuals view themselves in relation to the profession in which they work and comes largely from career development literature (Slay & Smith, 2011). Slay & Smith (2011) posited that one's professional identity is shaped by three main influences: socialization processes, career transitions, and internal redefinitions of priorities. In graduate education literature, professional identity development is primarily concerned with preparing doctoral students for faculty roles (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013). Advances in that body of literature have broadened this view to consider differences across institutions, acknowledging that each discipline and each institution has unique norms and expectations to which graduate students are being socialized (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, 2010; Sallee, 2011). Since the focus of much of the research is on the academy as both the context in which socialization is happening as well as the primary career field graduate

students are entering, professional identity development and academic identity development are often used interchangeably in much of the literature.

Professional identity development within graduate school is increasingly being seen as a dynamic process instead of a linear one, where graduate students continually interpret and reinterpret their experiences (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013). Another development within the literature comes from the application of sociocultural theories and network theories to further understand the socialization process within graduate school (Baker & Lattuca, 2010). This interdisciplinary approach puts relationships at the center of the socialization process, both in how a student learns and develops expertise and in how a student's professional identity is shaped. Early forms of this approach focused primarily on the relationship between students and advisors, but more current approaches are taking into account peer networks and personal communities in and out of the academy (Baker & Lattuca, 2010).

Largely missing from the discussion on professional identity are students who arrive at graduate school with already existing professional identities. Much of the research on professional identity development in graduate school assumes that students show up to graduate programs with no previous work experience, which may be true within many doctoral programs that accept the majority of their students directly from undergraduate programs or programs that accept students directly from master's programs. However, many graduate students have significant previous work experience and therefore arrive at graduate school with a professional identity already in place. Many students also continue to work full- or part-time in their professions during their graduate studies (Gardner & Barker, 2014).

Some researchers have attempted to bridge this gap by building models of professional identity development for graduate students that begin before graduate school and extend beyond

graduation. McAlpine's (2012) identity-trajectory model embeds the graduate school experience within the greater context of a person's life, taking into account where a person has been as well as where they intend to go. McAlpine's research team and another team of researchers studied over 80 doctoral students over a five-year period. Students were enrolled at four different universities in Canada and the UK across many disciplines. From her analysis of these students' experiences, McAlpine argued for the need to highlight doctoral students' individual agency, the narratives of their personal lives and the influence of their past on their present context. She contended that, "[t]he nesting of the academic within the personal... ensures a comprehensive perspective in making sense of doctoral intentions, motivations, and decision-making (McAlpine, 2012, p. 38). McAlpine concluded with pedagogical and policy recommendations based on identity-trajectory that would better support the experiences of all doctoral students. Models like this show great promise for taking into account personal identity factors, particularly marginalized identities, and how individuals experience the socialization process of graduate school differently.

Baker and Pifer (2015) also took into account the developmental trajectory of graduate students when applying theories of fit to doctoral education, looking specifically at how antecedents and outcomes are related to fit. They situated their work in the changing nature of doctoral education, arguing that as the purposes of and pathways to doctoral education change, we must change how we study doctoral education itself. Baker and Pifer (2015) surveyed the research on three types of fit in the context of doctoral education: person-environment fit, person-culture fit, and person-vocation fit. Person-environment fit asks how students fit within their programs, departments, institutions, and regions. Person-culture fit asks how students fit with the values within the communities of their departments and disciplines. Person-vocation fit

looks at how students fit within their academic experiences and perceived career options. Baker and Pifer (2015) examined each type of fit considering how outcomes might change if the antecedents (a student's previous life experience) were different. This type of theoretical work lays out a helpful framework when studying the experiences of returning professionals, whose antecedents will certainly inform their experience of fit within their doctoral programs.

My study continues this line of inquiry, looking at the trajectory of the professional identity development process in the lives of doctoral students who have worked for at least seven years before returning to school. Their experience of professional identity development in doctoral education is unique and will help us understand not only their experience, but also possibly those who return to higher education at other levels as well. In this next section, I turn to role theory as a way to understand how having an established professional identity may complicate the experience of being a graduate student.

Role Theory

Role theory, from the field of social psychology, offers a helpful way to conceptualize the tensions that returning professionals are likely to face in graduate school. Role theory, which is more of a framework of theories than a singular theory, asserts that there are expected and proscribed behaviors for people occupying different positions in society (Biddle, 1986; Stryker, 2001). There are many types of conflicts that can occur because of the various roles that we each hold at any one point in time. *Intra-role conflict* occurs when there are disagreements over what expectations of a certain role should be (Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981). For example, a graduate student may feel pressured by expectations from her professors to spend more time reading for her classes while also feeling pressured by the expectations from her lab supervisor to focus more on her research. Her singular role as a graduate student has competing

expectations within that role depending on the source of those expectations. *Role ambiguity/confusion* occurs when a person is unsure of which role to play in a certain context (Biddle, 1986). In this case, imagine a graduate student who is attending a committee meeting for supporting off-campus students. Does she introduce herself as a doctoral student, a community member, or a university donor? She holds all three of these roles and more, but the positioning of each role has different advantages and challenges, and others at that meeting would have different expectations of her depending on how she introduces herself.

Role conflict occurs when the expectations of one role conflict with the expectations of another role (Biddle, 1986). For example, a graduate student may find that his supervisor needs him at the lab until midnight, but his child has just come down with a cold and he needs to take his child to urgent care. This student is experiencing role conflict, being “forced to deal simultaneously with several urgent, incompatible demands” (Home, 1998). *Role strain* occurs when a person in a role finds the expectations of that singular role to be too demanding (Grady, La Touche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers & Simacek, 2014). In this case, it is easy to think of a graduate student who is overwhelmed trying to complete her homework, perform her teaching assistantship duties, and conduct research experiments in her lab. The cumulative load of the expectations of being a graduate student can be daunting. *Role overload* occurs when a person has too many roles and not enough time to fulfill the expectations of all of them (Grady, et al., 2014). For example, a graduate student may be caught between studying for his classes, attending his children’s sporting events, and caring for his aging parents. His roles of student, parent, and child make competing demands on his time, as in role conflict, but it is the overall quantity of the demands of multiple roles that is causing the conflict in the case of role overload. Much of the literature on returning adult learners describes role strain and role overload as a

major source of stress for graduate students (Grady, et al., 2014; Kohler Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Role theory has been used to study the experiences of graduate students. Baird (1972), using an organizational approach, studied the role relations of graduate students. He surveyed 689 graduate students at two different institutions and covered the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences. The students were categorized by stage in the program and where they were employed while in school. He found evidence to confirm that the role of a “graduate student” is a distinct role in itself and studied how graduate students interacted with people in other roles. He also studied how those relations evolved over the course of graduate education. Baird (1972) found that graduate students adapted to the graduate student role over time, showing more commitment to their field at the end of their program than they did at the beginning. He also found that students experienced more role conflict when their work roles were more time intensive and when they also had family responsibilities to juggle. Baird’s (1972) study is somewhat limited in that it took place over forty years ago and the landscape of higher education and the graduate student role has certainly evolved since that time. He also did not aggregate the data by gender, race, or any other social identity, but his work has been foundational in establishing that the graduate student role is a distinct role.

As awareness increased of the complexity of the graduate student experience, researchers began looking at the sources of role conflict as well as mediating factors and coping strategies (Dyk, 1987). Women in particular were a source of interest as researchers sought to understand the unique pressures women experienced with balancing their roles as wives, mothers, and graduate students (Dyk, 1987; Home, 1998, Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Women’s roles, due to gender socialization processes, are different than male roles in the context of family, work,

and school. The difference in role expectations along the lines of gender have been found to increase the likelihood of role conflict for women more than for men (Dyk, 1987; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Jazvac-Martek (2009) used role identity theory to try to understand how doctoral students experienced graduate school. Jazvac-Martek studied doctoral students in an education program. As doctoral students entered their programs, they were being socialized to two different roles: current students and future faculty. Both of these roles have different expectations from self and from others. Jazvac-Martek (2009) found that these two identities were often in conflict with one another. It was difficult, for example, for students to view themselves as professional academics when they experienced a lack of agency as students in their doctoral program. The results of the study indicated that most students coped with the tensions by oscillating between the two identities, shifting their perceptions of themselves to match the external and internal expectations of each situation. Jazvac-Martek's (2009) work has a future orientation, focusing on role challenges in doctoral students who are being prepared for faculty roles. My study begins with the antecedents in mind, looking at how doctoral students' previously formed professional identities interact with the expectations of the doctoral student role.

Roles and identities are both fluid concepts that inform each other and shape each other. A role has expectations for behavior that shapes a sense of identity. A person enters a role with a sense of identity that impacts how that person will enact that role. That person's identity is both being shaped by and shaping their behavior in a particular role. Returning professionals have taken on the role of a graduate student. They are no longer operating in their role as a professional worker, but they still have a professional identity. Their professional identity will shape how they react to the expectations of the graduate student role. Their professional identity

will also be shaped by those expectations as they continue to be socialized within their programs. For some returning professionals, their identity as a professional may remain a very salient identity domain, as they are in graduate education to further their professional goals. For others, perhaps their professional identity will be much less developed and therefore much less salient while in graduate school. What factors determine how a returning professional experiences their professional identity? Does a returning professional experience a conflict of expectations from their identity as a professional worker while in their role as a graduate student? Role theory would lead us to expect that if these roles have drastically different expectations, an intra-role conflict would likely occur, where the student would feel caught between competing expectations within their role as a graduate student.

Conclusion

All students arrive at graduate school with varied previous life experiences, and students who return to doctoral programs after having worked professionally bring an already established professional identity back to school with them. They arrive with varied expectations of the graduate school experience and have varied goals for where they hope to find a job (Boud & Tennant, 2006). During their time in graduate school, the socialization process will impact them in unique ways, creating a new set of expectations that may introduce intra-role conflicts that must be navigated.

There are some exciting new directions in professional identity development research as described above, including identity-trajectory theory (McAlpine, 2012) and theories of fit (Baker & Pifer, 2015). Both of these theories embed the learning and socialization that take place in graduate school within the context of a person's life story. They make space to consider where those students have been and where they are trying to go. We must reframe our view of graduate

students to see them as people who are “purposely striving to achieve life goals in relation to past and present experiences, relationships, and responsibilities” (McAlpine, 2012). It is these whole person approaches that offer the best chance of understanding how individuals make meaning of their graduate school experience. Identity researchers have begun to acknowledge the need for more whole person theories of identity development, moving from understanding the different pieces of a person’s identity to seeing the bigger picture of how those pieces work together (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). This integrated view of people is perhaps methodologically inconvenient at times, as it requires that we slow down and understand individual narratives. It is worth the effort, however, as it offers us deeper insight into how people’s professional identities are shaped by socialization processes and how those processes shape and are shaped themselves by people’s professional identities.

METHODOLOGY

As established in the literature review in the preceding chapter, we know very little about doctoral students who have worked before returning to school and how their professional identities impact their experience as graduate students. These students, whom I have called “returning professionals,” may experience a type of intra-role conflict where the expectations of their previously established professional identity conflict with the new expectations of being a graduate student. In order to better support returning professionals, we need to know more about their unique experience and how they navigate the socialization process of graduate education. We also need to know more about the unique resources they possess and how to help them recognize and leverage those resources. Additionally, we need to know more about how these students experience the climate of their graduate education programs and if these programs are providing adequate mechanisms of support and validation for this growing population of students. With those goals in mind, I explored the following research questions to better understand how returning professionals experience and navigate graduate education:

1. How do returning professionals in doctoral programs experience ongoing shifts in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student as it relates to their professional identity?
2. What tensions do returning professionals experience in their role as graduate students that are informed by their existing professional identity?
3. How did returning professionals’ professional identity impact their experience of the socialization process of doctoral education?

My research questions went through several rounds of development over the course of completing my dissertation. Creswell reminded qualitative researchers to “expect research questions to evolve and change during the study in a manner consistent with the assumptions of an emerging design” (Creswell, 2014, p. 141). As I began to analyze the data, I realized that my

original research questions as posed during the proposal defense were too broad. For example, my third research question was originally “What factors influence how returning professionals experience the socialization process of graduate school?” As I attempted to answer this question from the data, I realized that myriad factors influenced how my participants experienced socialization and many of them had nothing to do with professional identity or were not factors that were unique to returning professionals. In light of that realization, I narrowed the focus of the third research question to emphasize professional identity in the context of graduate socialization. The first and second research questions were also adjusted in an attempt to be more clear about the issue I am most interested in, which is the construct of professional identity. Sharpening my research questions helped me be more focused in analyzing the data and allowed me to filter out things that were interesting but did not directly relate to professional identity.

Epistemology

As a researcher, it is important that I identify my epistemological assumptions. Epistemological assumptions, what we believe about knowledge and reality, inform how we approach a topic, how we define it, and why we choose to study it the way we do (Glesne, 2011). I believe that humans construct their own view of reality and that researchers and participants co-create a sense of meaning through the research enterprise. I also have a critical perspective, as I believe the socializing forces that shape us from our birth onward are full of inadequate paradigms that ascribe power and privilege along unequal lines. For example, gender, race, sexual identity, beauty, and ability are all socially constructed in ways that give more power and privilege to those who belong to certain groups.

My research paradigm, therefore, is built on a base of constructivist ways of knowing that leans toward critical perspectives and outcomes. I constructed my interview protocols in a way

that attempted to limit the influence of my experience on the participants' reflections. I did not want to lead with my own experience and assumptions in a way that could overly influence the responses of my participants by "showing my hand." I refrained from sharing my own stories and experiences until the participants had addressed questions first in order to limit my impact on what each participant shared. At the same time, I believe that interviews should be approached as much as possible as dialogues among equals, and I tried not to position myself as an objective expert learning from a subject. I identified myself as a fellow returning professional at the beginning of the interview in order to build rapport and trust and to create the possibility of genuine dialogue. This type of dialogue opened up the possibility for us "to create meaning in our own lives and to see meaning in the lives of others and the world around us, and for us to come into our full potential as human beings" (Bai, Scott & Cohen, 2013, p. 15). It is my hope that participants, editors, and readers of this dissertation are challenged in some way and are invited to see reality from a different viewpoint than their own. We all need to be reminded that our perspective is always limited and has often been passed on to us through channels whose agendas need to be identified and challenged. We all have so much to learn from one another and I hope my research adds new lenses to both problems and solutions.

Conceptual Perspectives

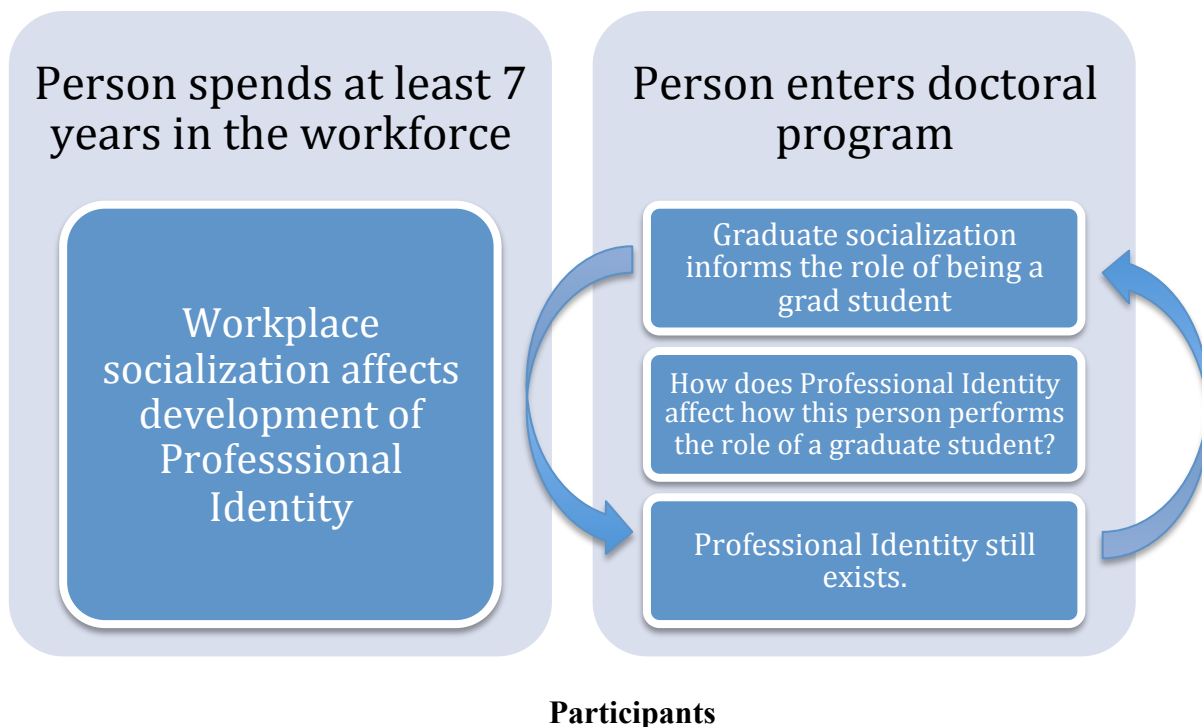
My work has been informed by several key theories from developmental psychology and social psychology. From developmental psychology, my foundation rests upon the identity work that comes from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory, whose work I described in more detail in the literature review. To briefly recap the salient points, Erikson (1968) theorized that humans go through developmental stages that occur at relatively predictable times along the chronological timeline of human growth. In stage five, identity versus role confusion, beginning

as early as adolescence, humans must resolve a conflict between identity (a cohesive sense of self) and role confusion (a diffuse sense of self). Later, more diverse voices added to the conversation on psychosocial development, such as Ruth Jossleson, Carol Gilligan, William Cross, Jean Kim and many others, bringing in perspectives on the development of women and racial minorities. The field of identity development in postsecondary education has expanded even further to include identity domains such as sexuality, religion, and ability, and in specific populations such as veterans and adult learners (Evans et al., 2009). My participants' professional identities developed in distinct ways that were impacted by all of the identity domains that they hold. For example, a Latino man working in a predominantly white company will have experienced the socialization process of his workplace in a different way than a white woman in that same company. His professional identity development will have taken a different path than hers accordingly. Those with minoritized identities will also be impacted in distinct ways by the socialization process of graduate education. I made a concerted effort to take those identities into account as I gathered, interpreted and analyzed the data.

From social psychology, role theory is a very good fit for my research, as I demonstrated in the literature review. Role theory asserts that there are expected and proscribed behaviors for people occupying different positions in society (Stryker, 2001). Most salient to my research, intra-role conflict occurs when there are incongruent or competing expectations of how someone should play a role (Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981). From the view of role theory, I focus on the issue of how having an existing professional identity informs or complicates how a returning professional performs the role of being a graduate student. I believe this combination of theoretical lenses is the most helpful guide for understanding the experiences of returning

professionals. Figure 3.1, below, displays how these theories work together. With these theoretical lenses in mind, I will turn now to a discussion of the methods I used.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual Perspectives That Inform This Study



In order to qualify for this study, a person must have worked full time for a period of at least seven years, which would put the participants well into vocational psychologist Donald Super's stage of Establishment (Savickas, 2002). Super constructed a research-based theory of career development and postulated that people are satisfied with their careers in proportion to how successfully they can implement their vocational self-concept in their work. His theory has five stages. Stage One, Growth, occurs around ages 4-13 where children are learning about the world of work and beginning to form a vocational self-concept. Stage Two, Exploration, takes place between ages 14-24, and consists of adolescents testing and actualizing their vocational self-concept by choosing a career. Stage Three, Establishment, takes place between ages 24-44. In this stage, the focus is on the implementation of one's vocational self-concept, which implies

that one's self-concept as a worker, which I am calling professional identity, has had time to be formed and tested to a certain extent. Stage Four, Maintenance or Management, describes the mid-life stage of reevaluating their career choices and Stage Five, Disengagement, describes the transition out of the workforce and into retirement (Savickas, 2002). My participants all worked for at least seven years and were all at least in their late 20's, well into Super's stage of Establishment. Though Super's model assumes a more linear path than many adults take today in their professional journeys, those who have worked for at least seven years will have had time to explore and develop a sense of professional identity.

Participants had to be in the third year of their programs or beyond in order to have had enough time to experience the graduate student socialization process. This factor ensured that participants would be in or past the Informal stage of socialization, where they have learned what their graduate programs expect of them as doctoral students (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). The nature of the third year experience will certainly vary by discipline, but most third-year doctoral students will be finishing up their coursework and some will be entering into the personal stage of socialization, a time of reconciling the "incongruity between their previous self-image and their new professional image" (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001, p. 14). In order to address questions about professional identity development, it made sense to study doctoral students who were in the midst of the transition from the informal to the personal stage, or students who had already gone through this transition and could speak to it in hindsight.

Sampling Procedures

I used purposive sampling to find participants, selecting individuals because of their positionality and perspective on the topic of interest (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). I reached out through an initial recruiting email using formal and informal networks of doctoral students to

find participants with whom I did not have a previous relationship. The email was sent out through several listservs on campus, and as word circulated, some who received the email sent it to individual doctoral students who met the criteria listed above. These potential participants responded directly to me and I then determined if they did meet all of the criteria. Some respondents were excluded because they had not worked for enough years. Others were excluded because they were international students and I chose to focus on the experience of domestic students to limit the number of factors I had to consider in understanding each participant's experience of graduate school. A few respondents were excluded because I already had several participants from their college or program and I was trying to maximize the diversity of my sample across colleges. I chose a maximum of three people from each college and only two from any one program. Since disciplinary factors contribute to the nature of the socialization process, talking to participants from a wide spread of disciplines was important (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, 2010). I also attempted to find as diverse a sample as I could in terms of gender and race. I selected a total of twelve participants across six different colleges and ten different programs in order to ensure that my participants represented a wide spectrum of experiences. There were six male identified students and six female identified students, and three of the female students identified as women of color.

Narrative-Inspired Data Collection

The approach I used was inspired by the tradition of narrative inquiry. Narrative research comes from the sociological and anthropological research traditions and was first used as a type of life story analysis of individuals of interest (Chase, 2007). A narrative as a unit of analysis may be an entire life story, an extended description of a particular aspect of someone's life (e.g. becoming a mother, fighting in a war, etc.), or it may be a short story about a specific incident

(Chase, 2007). Narrative methods are used as a way of collecting data, a way of analyzing data, and a way of organizing or presenting data (McAlpine, 2016).

Narrative inquiry has been used in many ways in higher education research and in studying doctoral education in particular. Researchers have used narrative inquiry to study perceptions of doctoral work, relationships between advisors and advisees, embodied experiences of doctoral students and cases of doctoral attrition (McAlpine, 2016). Narrative methods have also been integrated with critical analysis methods to understand the experiences of graduate students with marginalized identities (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). My work will continue the use of narrative methods in higher education by studying returning professionals' experiences within their programs.

My interviews are narrative in that they are designed to elicit participant's stories about the time period between graduating from their undergraduate institutions up to the current time period. I chose this data collecting strategy because stories are particularly useful in studying the concept of identity (Chase, 2007; Slay & Smith, 2011). Slay and Smith (2011) suggested that narrative inquiry is relevant for studying professional identity in particular, arguing that "career stories may be used to make sense of the career experiences and inform the professional self-concept" (p. 91). I elicited stories from my participants that demonstrated their professional identity at work, as suggested by Slay and Smith (2011). Through these stories, I gained insight into how participants' professional identities were shaped over time by examining their professional sense of self before and during their time in their doctoral programs.

Data Collection Process

Since socialization processes are likely different at different institutions (Gardner, 2008), I collected data from only one institution to simplify the analysis. I selected participants from a

large research institution because there are more doctoral students at this type of institution than at others (Nerad, 2004). This institution is a large public university in the Midwest with 13 colleges that grant PhDs. As required, I obtained permission to collect data from the Institutional Review Board before finding or interviewing participants.

Once participants were selected, I let them know what to expect, which was an initial interview of approximately 60 minutes, a follow up interview, and a \$25 gift card as compensation for their time. I asked them to email me a current resume/CV prior to the interview, which I reviewed before the interview to get a sense of what type of work they had done and how long they had worked before starting their PhD programs. At the beginning of the interview, they read and signed the consent form (see Appendix A). I then conducted the initial semi-structured interview (see Appendix B for the Interview 1 Protocol). Semi-structured interviews ask a series of open-ended questions followed by a list of possible prompts, which allows the researcher some flexibility in guiding the interview (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). All participants were asked to address the same overarching questions but, unlike a structured interview, they had more freedom to share according to their interests. I also had more freedom to pursue lines of questions that were prompted by what participants shared about themselves, asking them to expand on stories or thoughts that I would not have known about until the interviews were in process. I also took field notes during the interviews that helped me identify key themes or interesting features of each interview during data analysis. These initial interviews took between 49 minutes and 76 minutes with an average of around 61 minutes.

After the initial interviews were completed, I listened to each interview in its entirety and re-read the field notes that I wrote during each interview. This review allowed me to prepare for the follow up interview by checking that I had asked each overarching question. It also allowed

me to identify clarifying questions or follow up questions about anything that was shared. I interviewed each participant a second time conducting another semi-structured interview (see Appendix B for the Interview 2 Protocol). Time between interviews ranged from 5 to 42 days, the average being just under 30 days. Ideally, I wanted to leave 3-4 weeks between interviews to give participants more of a chance to reflect between sessions. Some of the timing however, was impacted by participant availability over the summer term. I began interviews in May and a few participants had to complete both interviews before they left for the summer. The second interviews tended to be slightly shorter and were between 29 and 96 minutes with an average of 54.5 minutes.

During the follow up interviews, I chose to use a photo-elicitation exercise where participants were asked to choose visual representations of their experiences in graduate school in response to prompts. Visual images activate different parts of the brain, giving participants access to a different type of information, and photo elicitation has been found a useful way to approach studying identity and culture in particular (Harper, 2002). I asked participants a series of three questions and invited them to choose a picture or set of pictures from preselected stock images that best represented the answers to the questions. They could use the same picture to answer more than one question and they could also adjust the image if it made more sense to them (e.g. some participants picked the image of a light at the end of a tunnel but said that the light should be smaller or dimmer than it was in the picture to better represent how they felt).

There are two main approaches to photo-elicitation (Richard & Lahman, 2015). The first is researcher-generated pictures, where researchers take pictures of participants or select images for participants to review. The second is participant-generated pictures, where participants are asked to take pictures or select pictures from their lives that have meaning to them in light of the

research topic at hand. I chose to use a researcher-generated approach and used stock photos that were numbered for ease and consistency of recording. They were a set of 50 photos that I used in my previous job called “Soularium” that was designed by a colleague to generate conversations with college students and I had used them as ice-breakers with individual students as well as in small groups. These types of pictures are considered “decontextualized photos,” meaning that they did not have any specific or intentional connection to my research topic (Richard & Lahman, 2015). I hoped that in giving each participant the opportunity to select from the same pool of photographs, I would see a meaningful pattern in which pictures they selected. This did not turn out to be the case. The photo-elicitation exercise seemed to be meaningful and participants often remarked that they enjoyed it, but it did not generate any unique data and I was not able to identify any patterns in the selection of photographs. In future research of this kind, I argue that allowing participants to take or select their own pictures would give them more opportunity for meaning-making. If I had used this strategy instead, I believe I would have gained more insight into the lived experience of participants.

Because of the interactive nature of my interview protocols, it was important to conduct the interviews in person. Interviews were conducted in private offices on campus that were accessible and convenient for participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. I transcribed several of the interviews by hand and sent others out to be transcribed by a professional transcriber that I then checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

I decided to complete the data analysis by hand instead of using software such as Dedoose or NVivo. To begin analyzing the data, I printed out a single sided copy of each interview labeled with the participant’s pseudonym and identified as either the first or second

interview. During my analysis of data gathered during my pilot study that I conducted in the summer of 2017, I found it helpful to use two coding cycles to analyze the data, a process I also used on my dissertation data.

The first cycle was a round of deductive coding using codes that had been predetermined before data collection (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). These deductive codes were established through the inductive coding I conducted in my pilot study. I attempted to keep them broad enough to point my attention to data relevant to my research questions but not so limited that they might prevent me from seeing new themes in the data. During this first cycle of coding, I used a pen to write in the margins of the interview to underline or block off quotes that fell under one of my ten initial deductive codes. I also found quotes that were relevant to my research questions that did not fit into one of those codes, so the codes themselves were revised and updated as I progressed through the interviews.

Once I finished the first cycle of coding, I cleaned up the codes and reorganized them. I collapsed a few codes that were too specific into one broader code. For example, one of my deductive codes was “mentorship,” and it was only mentioned in passing by a few participants. I realized that the comments about mentorship fit into a broader category of how participants found themselves relating to faculty, so I ended up removing “mentorship” as a distinct code and used the code of “relationship with faculty” for those comments. Another of the initial deductive codes was “obstacles to returning” which did come up many times. As I read through the quotes under this code, however, I realized that these quotes related to obstacles to returning for a PhD that would be the same for any returning adult learner and were not focused on the issue of professional identity. As a result, I chose to remove this code.

Conversely, I split several codes that were too general into more specific codes. A new code that arose during this first round of coding was “vulnerabilities.” This code indicated that participants were vulnerable to some of the dynamics of graduate school in a way that was unique to being returning professionals. A few things that I identified as vulnerabilities I realized could be grouped under the code of “academy vs. industry.” For example, I originally identified these two phenomena as vulnerabilities: 1. participants’ experience of the fluidity of program rules and 2. uncertainty about access to funding. I realized that both of these phenomena were experienced as vulnerabilities because returning professionals were used to more structures and clear processes in their previous jobs. I then grouped all of those quotes under the new code of “academy vs. industry – standards,” which indicated a difference in the practices that guide professionalism in academia and those in the industries participants had come from.

I then put all of the new codes under one of my research question to ensure that I was focused enough on answering each question, a process that also helped me refine my research questions as mentioned above. I continued to narrow the focus of my research questions to be more targeted on phenomena specific to my population, as I could at times be pulled into stories that were interesting but could apply to any returning adult learner. I also needed to be more targeted on professional identity development, as some things that gained my attention were interesting but had more to do with stage of life or general motivations for returning to school.

I went back through each interview for a second cycle of coding using the updated codes. In the second cycle of coding, I also used Versus Coding, a method of coding that identifies “in dichotomous or binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other” (Saldana, 2016, p. 137). I had found

many contrasts in my initial round of coding, and Versus Coding helped me bring those contrasts to the foreground. Versus Codes were especially helpful in answering my second research question, which dealt with tensions experienced by returning professionals (see Appendix C which contains my initial deductive codes as well as the refined code book).

After the second cycle of coding was complete, I wrote vignettes for each participant. These vignettes were chronological retellings of the participant's journey, starting from their first job out of college and ending with their current experience as doctoral students. In the vignettes, I also briefly summarized their experience in their doctoral programs. Keeping with the narrative tradition, although my data analysis was not strictly narrative in nature, I sought to "listen first to the voices *within* each narrative" before looking for themes across them (Chase, 2005, p. 663, italics in original).

After finishing the vignettes, I cut out coded sections of each interview, wrote the pseudonym and interview number on it, and put the sections in piles according to their codes. If a section of an interview contained more than one code, I made a copy of the section on a copy machine and put the copies in their respective piles. I ended up with thirteen separate piles organized under my three research questions and a fourth section of codes related to themes that reached across the research questions, such as how participants were defining professional identity or vulnerabilities as a graduate student that did not fit into one clear category. This approach helped me get a very clear visual of the data and also helped me reorganize some of the categories, which in turn, led me to further revise my research questions (see Appendix C for a picture of these "data piles").

I then began writing summaries of the data in each pile, getting a sense of the themes of each quote and how those themes related to each other. These documents were instrumental in

further refining my codes and how those codes were organized under each research question. For example, “relationship with faculty” started out as a code underneath the first research question, as it seemed to me that it was this shift into graduate school that influenced the dynamics with faculty members that participants described. Upon further review, those quotes as a whole fit much better under the second research question, as those dynamics were informed by the uncertainty of which role to play, student or professional. I was able to physically move the piles from one place to another, and would make the adjustment in the summary documents.

I went back through all of the digital copies of the interviews and pulled all of the quotes from each pile into one single word document. Having all the quotes in one place made it much easier to cut and paste quotes for the write up of the findings chapter. These “master quote documents” also served as an audit trail to ensure that I was doing justice to all of the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

I also performed a separate analysis of the data gathered during the photo-elicitation exercise. During the photo-elicitation exercise in the follow up interview, I recorded which photographs each participant chose for each of the three questions, which was made easy as each picture was numbered 1 through 50. After the interviews were complete, I laid out the set of pictures that each participant had chosen for all three of the questions and took a picture of each set to make it easier to compare between participants. Then, with the help of a peer reviewer, we created a list of which photographs had been chosen for which question to see if any patterns arose. While many pictures were used more than once, participants often remarked that they would change an element of the photograph to make it fit their situation more accurately, which made direct comparisons more complicated. As discussed above, no clear pattern was found in the data generated by the photo-elicitation exercise.

The vignettes I wrote for each participant preserved the narrative of each individual. The analysis I performed allowed me to see patterns in their stories. In this way, I hoped to let each narrative be something that could stand alone and be understood in its own context. I also wanted to bring my participants into conversation with one another by looking for similarities and differences in their experiences. I wanted to allow for possibility of the experiences of my participants to speak to larger systemic issues that are occurring in the context of graduate education.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness is established by checking for accuracy by using certain strategies. I conducted member checking, where I asked all participants to read the vignettes that I wrote about them as well as any quotes that I used, and ensure that participants felt they were being accurately portrayed (Creswell, 2014). It was also important to me that they looked for anything that would make them identifiable. All but two participants responded to this request, and of the ten that responded, six of them asked for minor changes to be made that either protected their confidentiality or clarified a point they were trying to make.

I also searched for discrepant information in the interviews, looking for stories or comments that would disconfirm my findings (Creswell, 2014). During the analysis of the data from my pilot study, I recognized my tendency to see what I wanted to see in the data. As a result, when I analyzed the data for my dissertation, I was much more intentional about looking for things that did not fit my expectations. By putting the coded sections in piles and compiling them into one master document for each code, I was able to identify several quotes that diverged from the rest. For example, Steve remarked that he purposefully did not want to identify himself with his work. His understanding of his professional identity was very different from my other

participants and the contrast of his choice may have been easy to miss had I not been comparing all of the quotes about professional identity.

I also utilized peer debriefing, asking a peer to review my work at different stages of completion (Creswell, 2014). This peer reviewer helped ensure that I was not approaching my data from too narrow a lens, especially since my own experience as a returning professional could have affected my ability to see things clearly. Specifically, as mentioned above, I had this peer reviewer analyze the photo-elicitation sections of the interviews, as it had been a challenging section for me to analyze. This reviewer, a fellow doctoral student with experience in qualitative data analysis, helped me organize the data and ultimately agreed with the lack of a clear pattern in the data. This reviewer also looked over sections of the findings and discussion chapters, helping me make sense of the data and explain my thinking more clearly.

I must also acknowledge my biases (Creswell, 2014). As a returning professional myself, it is certain that I have some assumptions about how other returning professionals have experienced graduate education. I identified myself to participants as one who shares their identity as a returning professional in the hopes of building trust, but I was careful not to over-relate or over-share my own experience during interviews. I am also a woman of color. Being a multiracial woman whose racial identity is not easy to discern by appearance, I do not know what stereotypes or assumptions participants may have made of me, as people often ascribe a wide variety of racial identities to me. They will have likely perceived that a non-white woman was conducting their interviews, and this realization may have impacted what they chose to share and how they chose to share it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the process I used to collect and analyze data. The next

chapter consists of a summary of all the participants as well as the vignettes of each participant. In the following chapter, I discuss the findings of this research project, describing the themes I found during data analysis and offering quotes from participants to illustrate those themes. In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings including recommendations for other returning professionals and for institutions. I also address the limitations of my study and propose directions for future research.

MEET THE PARTICIPANTS

I had the privilege of interviewing twelve doctoral students who shared their stories with me over the course of two in-person interviews. The chart below gives an overview of their pseudonyms and the details of their backgrounds that are particularly relevant to my research questions. I have listed the college in which their PhD programs are housed, what year they are in their program and how many years they spent working full time before starting their programs. I also listed their identified race and sex. As mentioned in the methods chapter, I intentionally worked to select participants from a variety of academic disciplines. I was also intentional about selecting participants across lines of racial and sexual identity. All participants were asked if they wanted to choose their own pseudonyms. I chose to ask them because I believe names are meaningful and I did not want to give someone a name that did not fit them. Seven participants chose their own pseudonyms and the remaining five were given the opportunity to give feedback about their pseudonym when member checking the data.

Table 4.1: Participant Summaries

Pseudonym	College	Year in program	Years of work	Identified Race	Identified Sex
Anne	Arts & Letters	3	13	Chicanx	Woman
Steve	Ag & Natural Resources	6	7	White	Man
Ryan	Ag & Natural Resources	4	7	White	Woman
Carmen	Ag & Natural Resources	3	10	White	Woman
Michael	Education	4	10	White	Man
Rosanna	Education	5	14	Black	Woman
Sucre	Education	3	9	Afro-indigenous	Woman
Ed	Engineering	8	41	White	Man
Alan	Natural Science	5	10	White	Man
Thomas	Social Science	3	7	White	Man
Peter	Social Science	4	7	White	Man
Sue	Social Science	2	15	White	Woman

In the following section, I give a brief description of each participant. I first highlight their career backgrounds and their trajectory into their PhD programs. I then summarize their experience within their programs. I have selected the parts of their background and experience that are most relevant to my research questions. I have also changed or obscured any details that may make participants identifiable.

Anne

Anne is a single mother who worked in various jobs for the past thirteen years. She worked for a time as a crew member for music groups on tour and then at a doctor's office, followed by a five-year stint as a clerk in a rural hospital's ER unit. While there, she decided to earn a bachelor's degree in order to pursue a career as an English teacher, a job that would be less taxing and better structured for her to spend time with her son. She ended up leaving her job at the ER and worked a variety of jobs, ending up as the associate director of a college writing center. While working on a Masters degree, she realized that teaching at the university level appealed to her more than teaching high school, so she decided to pursue a PhD with the idea of becoming a professor. Her primary motivation for work is to have stability and freedom, informed by her own upbringing that was very chaotic and challenging. It is important for her that she love her job but her job also has to support her ability to care for her children. Her professional identity is varied in terms of the kinds of jobs she has held, but her trajectory has consistently led her toward teaching and being a part of "changing a life for the better."

Anne's experience in her program has had its ups and downs. Her perception is that her professional experiences have been valued in terms of her research but not in terms of her teaching. As a woman who identifies as a queer Chicana whose work involves marginalized populations, she feels a strong level of support for her work. She feels, however, that her

program did not account for her experience teaching at the college level, which led to feelings of being “babysat” during her teaching assistantship instead of feeling trusted to know when to ask for help if and when she needed it. She asserts that the PhD “professionalized” her, which she explained as training her how to function as an academic, a contrast to what it felt like to be a professional in other settings in terms of how people talk and write and how they dress. She has felt the financial stresses of being a doctoral student as a significant challenge and at times, she feels like a “broken down bike” that used to be useful and may one day be useful again. Her reaction to the stressors has been informed by her time working in the ER, which gave her a very high tolerance for stress and a unique perspective on what counts as a crisis.

Steve

Steve worked as a quality analyst before coming back to get his PhD. After working for several years in what was an entry level job, he realized that his earning potential and his overall job satisfaction would be much improved with a PhD. From the beginning, he assumed he would get an industry job, though he has remained open to a job in academia as well. His academic and career direction have been governed by pragmatic concerns. He chose to major in biology because he knows he is good at science and the degree was flexible enough to keep a lot of options open. In his career, he looks for jobs that are difficult enough to be interesting but not so difficult that his stress level is too high. He chose to study plant genetics because it seemed like a field with good job security, working with agricultural crops that people depend on for food. He was also pleased that his work would help others.

Steve has enjoyed being in the rich intellectual environment of his program. He has found maintaining a sense of work-life balance to be a challenge in graduate school. He did not feel like his professional experiences were valued by faculty or other students but it also did not

bother him: “I can see it being frustrating for others but I really like working and doing the work... I don’t define myself through my work, so it didn’t really bother me.” He did notice a big difference in the safety culture and good lab practices that he learned in his job, noting that the standards in academia are lower, which at times has been a frustration for him. His most salient frustrations in school, however, have been navigating how to deal with experiments that go wrong.

Ryan

After graduating from college, Ryan spent about three years traveling and working odd jobs at a stationary shop, a ski resort and then a coffee shop. She ended up finding a job working with youth with behavioral issues, providing direct care for the youths but also working her way into a supervisory role. She has had several other jobs since, all working in a social work capacity with underserved youth. Her most recent job focused on community outreach and programming around child abuse prevention. It is important for her to do work she is passionate about where she feels like she is making a difference in people’s lives. While doing advocacy work, she had started volunteering at a nonprofit organization that focused on environmental conservation. Her volunteer work opened up a new area of passion for her, which led her to apply for a PhD program that would enable her to work in communities stateside or abroad to help with conservation efforts.

Ryan’s transition to doctoral education has been stressful. She has felt the “imposter syndrome” strongly, feeling like she does not belong in a PhD program, especially one that she realizes now is very much geared toward preparing students to be faculty members. She has had the impression that some of her peers think her professional background in social work is not intellectually or academically rigorous enough to prepare her for doctoral level work. In order to

cope with these perceptions, she has intentionally immersed herself in her “student” role and has found that to be helpful. As one shifting to a brand new discipline, Ryan has felt like she has a lot of catching up to do in order to enter into conversations with fellow students. She has felt confident about engaging with and presenting information to community members, as many of her classmates have not had experience doing the kind of work she used to do.

Carmen

Carmen worked for four years as an outdoor educator after which she decided to move toward a career in ecology. After earning a Masters degree with a focus on the environment, she found a job as an environmental evaluator. She also started a consulting business doing evaluation work which she has continued to do while in her PhD program and has helped her continue to practice and benefit from the skills she developed in her previous work. Getting a PhD was something she had thought about since she was 12 years old, and when a job she had applied for fell through, she decided the time was right to go back to school. Carmen describes herself as “vocationally focused and occupationally fluid,” and values having sovereignty over the type of work she does, picking projects that are meaningful to her. She currently intends to pursue faculty positions after graduating, as she enjoys teaching, research and advising.

Carmen was most excited about having time to think “unbothered” by other concerns and to gain skills that would make her knowledge useful to others. She intentionally draws on all of her previous work experiences to inform her research agenda. She also looks back on hard lessons she learned in her Masters program, lessons which have helped her advocate for herself in her PhD program. She found an advisor who values her previous experiences and has the practice of calling those he works with his “graduate student colleagues.” She has had some frustrations over feeling like graduate students who are capable of doing professional level work

are not compensated the same way for that work as they would if they were being hired as external contractors. She sees a connection between professionalism and compensation and believes that graduate students should be treated as employees and not apprentices when appropriate. She has also been frustrated at the lack of transparency in program expectations, information she could have used to better advocate for herself in terms of crafting an educational experience that was better suited for her goals. Her experiences as a professional have trained her to negotiate, but she feels her efforts to do so as a graduate student have often been stymied.

Michael

Michael worked for ten years in several different occupational sectors. He first started in nonprofit work doing recruiting and fund raising before deciding to find a job that used his English degree. He began writing and managing grants for a company that contracted with the government. After four years in that job, feeling burned out from the pace and what turned out to be a fairly toxic work culture, he decided to pursue a job in higher education based on his recent experience of earning a Masters degree. He began working in an administrative role helping build and oversee a new academic program and in order to continue working in higher education, he decided to pursue a PhD. Michael's sense of professional identity is flexible in terms of the variety of industries in which he worked but also has a sense of stability in that all of his jobs included some sort of fund raising or grant writing. He was increasingly drawn toward jobs that felt like "noble professions" and is inspired by his mother, a lifelong educator, and his father, a bank manager with a very strong work ethic.

Michael's experience in the program overall has been positive. He has formed good relationships with the faculty in his program, though he has been disappointed that he has not been able to form a more connected and collegial relationship with his advisor. He has

experienced the return to school as a step backwards in some ways, where he is taking a calculated risk to quit his job for the possibility of advancement in the future. His perspective is informed by growing up in a coal mining community where people know they have to “pay their dues” to get ahead. He has struggled with the lack of structure and amount of autonomy he has experienced in his program and highlighted the frustration of his previous experience not being recognized or valued in this context. For one of his graduate assistantships, his job was to help other graduate students write grants. His previous experience was very relevant and he was even overqualified to be working on grants of several thousand dollars when he had been working on grants for hundreds of thousands of dollars, but found that faculty and students alike seemed to be hesitant to accept his help because he was “just a graduate student.” He has felt frustrated by this dynamic but reminds himself that he cannot expect others to know or care about his background and that he does not need affirmation from them to do his work well.

Rosanna

Rosanna worked for over 16 years in the non-profit sector doing a variety of activities such as program management and educational programming, which were all within the context of advocating for underserved populations. Her most recent job was working with a state government to provide and oversee grant funding to different community organizations. She also had taught at the college level and views teaching as an important component of the work she does. She had wanted to go back to school for a PhD for many years but waited until her kids were both out of the house. She was also motivated to get a PhD because she had seen a major disconnect in researchers with no connections to underserved communities coming to do research and then leaving once they had their data. There was no meaningful impact within the communities themselves. She decided she would become a researcher to close that gap.

Rosanna has faced many challenges in her program. She has truly enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and the learning environment but has felt very unsupported. She was motivated to get her PhD and return to the work which she was previously engaged. Her experience in graduate school is that she has been unable to make herself be “seen or heard” as a woman of color in the academy, which has rendered her invisible and undermined her confidence that the PhD would in fact help to advocate for underserved communities. She has also experienced graduate school as a place of loss and disconnection, She has taken what has become a bad risk by leaving a space where she garnered respect and held considerable expertise within the field, and exchanged it for a new space where she feels minimized. She described graduate school as “professional purgatory” in which she had lost confidence in the things she used to be good at and is not yet good enough at these new skills to know how to move forward in her life. She has also experienced the socialization process of graduate education as “a desire to reform you into a different somebody or something” that she has had to resist.

Sucre

Sucre came to her PhD program with 12 years of teaching experience, both in the US and abroad. During her early years as a teacher, she became involved in educational and student activism, advocating for students around issues such as opting out of standardized testing. She went on to teach internationally and her experience of having more autonomy over her classroom while overseas further informed her desire to see educational reform here in the US. She was able to write her own curricula and centered them around principles of social and environmental justice. Her convictions and her experiences led her to pursue a PhD, which she hopes will position her to open her own school in the future. Her professional identity is very salient to her as a teacher who is grounded in educational activism and she is very passionate about her work.

Sucre has enjoyed the autonomy of being a graduate student and has experienced a lot of freedom to build her research from what she is learning and what she was already passionate about. She has found the financial burden to be significant, however, and feels frustrated that finding money can become such a distraction to her work. She has also felt that her professional experience has not been recognized, especially in her role as a teaching assistant. She has felt treated as someone with no teaching experience, and her opinions have not been taken as seriously as she felt she deserved. She also experienced herself as being silenced when bringing up issues of race and culture within her program, though she has felt supported meaningfully by faculty outside of her program. As one who views herself as an activist, it has been dislocating and deeply discouraging to find herself in an environment and surrounded by faculty and peers who she perceives as supporting the status quo of an educational system she is trying to change.

Ed

Ed worked for just over 40 years in the computer science industry working in a variety of roles. In his most recent professional role, he was working for a company that encouraged him to get a PhD in order to add some helpful expertise within their company. Two years after he started the program, the company shifted directions and laid him off, at which point he transitioned from being a part-time student to a full-time student being funded by a teaching assistantship. He was married at the time to a woman who had a very high paying job and his children were all grown and living independently, so he was able to navigate these challenges without taking on much financial risk. Ed's professional identity is very stable. He considers himself an engineer and a "builder of things" who enjoys and has considerable expertise designing and building complex systems. At the time of the first interview, he had just defended

his dissertation and been hired as an educational specialist at the same institution where he earned his PhD.

Ed's experience of the program was largely positive. He found being back in an academic setting very "refreshing" and has enjoyed learning new things. He has also been encouraged at his ability to keep up with the younger students. His expertise was recognized and valued by his program, demonstrated by them offering him paid fellowships to work on departmental IT systems. As a student in the classroom, however, he felt that his expertise was not as valued, as the focus was more on research than application. He described a time when he recognized that some of the coding described in a paper would not have been up to industry standards and when he brought up his concerns, felt that the professor "was not receptive" to his critiques. He had some conflict with his advisor and perceived a higher level of support from his advisor to the students in his lab that came from his advisor's home country, a situation that felt discouraging to him at times. Overall, however, he has felt supported by faculty and the other students in his lab.

Alan

Alan worked full time before starting his undergraduate education. He worked for a large department store and then worked in an apartment complex doing maintenance. In both of those jobs, he enjoyed knowing that there were clear expectations for what work needed to be done, how to do the work and how to advance in the company. While he worked, he completed his GED and then decided to go on to community college, where he found mentors that encouraged him to continue on to get a bachelor's degree that would enable him to work in environmental conservation. Once he realized what was possible for himself academically and professionally, he decided to continue in school and get a PhD with the long-term goal of a faculty position.

Alan's sense of professional identity is flexible in terms of the kinds of work he has done and also has a pragmatic orientation of needing to provide for himself. He is also very driven by curiosity and a love for learning and sees the PhD as a "second chance" at life.

As a person who enjoys clarity of expectations, Alan has found the world of academia to be a frustrating place. He has often experienced the time lines and work processes to be unclear and this lack of clarity makes it hard for him to know that he is on target or making sufficient progress. He sees attitudes and actions of faculty toward their students that would not have been allowed in the corporate world, mentioning incidents that demonstrated favoritism where some students were given more attention, resources and funding than others and were simply treated better. He feels frustrated that he does not see a way to address these biases without making himself more vulnerable, as these faculty are the gatekeepers that he will need in the future to write him letters of recommendation. He wishes that working in academia felt more like a contract that both parties, faculty and students, would be held accountable to uphold.

Thomas

Thomas worked for seven years at the same company, first as an educator and then moving into several roles that included hiring, marketing and content development. Getting a PhD had been on his mind for a long time and though he knew it would be a temporary decrease in income, he was very enthusiastic about being in an environment when he could learn and be around others who also love to learn. He is considering both faculty jobs as well as jobs in industry and believes his program is well suited to prepare him for either. Thomas's professional identity is stable and highly salient to him in terms of having worked in one field and seeing himself in the past, present and future as a teacher. He views his work as a calling as opposed to a career or a job. To him, a calling is where one has a long-term vision for work that is a

passion. A career is work that includes a long-term vision that is cohesive in some way, but not necessarily a passion. A job is where one views work as a means to an end that is not necessarily part of a cohesive vision or plan.

His experience in his program has been positive. He felt that his work experience had given him an advantage over students with no work experience because of his ability to manage his time and meet deadlines and expectations. In his role as a teaching assistant, he was able to draw on his experience when lesson planning and grading. He has consistently felt that his previous professional experiences were recognized and valued in his program. He did at times struggle with what he perceived as a lower level of professionalism with fellow students and faculty, citing the difference in being in a for-profit environment where the “market forces efficiency.” He found that he had less autonomy in graduate school than he had in his previous work environment, which was different than most other participants, many of whom lamented that they had too much autonomy as doctoral students. This may also be due to Thomas still being in the stage of his PhD that is dominated by the structure of coursework instead of being in the dissertation stage that is much less structured.

Peter

Peter worked full time starting at a plastics manufacturing company and later worked at a call center as an inbound division supervisor. He knew he wanted to go on to graduate school, so after he graduated with his bachelor’s degree, he worked at an outpatient mental health clinic for four years as a project manager and study coordinator to gain the kind of experience that would make him a more attractive applicant. He originally thought that he would pursue a career in academia as faculty, but his focus shifted over the course of his program and he was able to find a full-time job in industry before he finished defending his dissertation, which is what he was

preparing to do at the time of our first interview. Peter's sense of professional identity is fluid in terms of his desire to develop core skills and abilities such as critical thinking and data analysis that are useful across a host of jobs and he has intentionally kept himself open to opportunities. He views his earlier jobs as primarily a way to make money, though he learned a lot of valuable management skills at the call center. He wanted to find a job that fit his core values and used his skillset to do something he would also find interesting.

Peter viewed his time in his PhD as "professional career development," a season of time he was dedicating to building skills to further his career aspirations. He chose to approach his school work with the same attitude he had his professional work instead of thinking of himself as a student in school. This approach was aided by the fact that he was commuting from about an hour away, which helped him keep time and space boundaries around his academic pursuits. One of his primary struggles was the feeling that there was always more he could be doing and feeling guilty when he was not working, especially since he was trying to approach graduate school like a job. He was also discouraged by what he perceived as the hierarchical structure of higher education with faculty at the top and students at the bottom, a dynamic that he felt hindered his ability to develop more collegial relationships with faculty members.

Sue

Sue worked for 15 years as a social worker doing a combination of clinical and administrative work. Some of her roles also included program coordination and work in the community with early parent interventions. The idea of getting a PhD had been in the back of her mind for years but there had always been personal and professional reasons why it was not the right time. She has always been one to stay open to new possibilities and opportunities for challenge and growth. The timing of her decision to go back to school was very dependent on

her family situation, as she wanted to make sure her children were self-sufficient enough that her focus on school would not detract from her role as a mother. She would like to work in academia not as a faculty member but as someone teaching clinical skills or overseeing internships or practicum experiences for future mental health clinicians. She views her work as very central to who she is and it is important for her to be doing work she is passionate about. Her sense of professional identity is stable as she thinks of herself as a social worker who prioritizes direct clinical work with clients but also enjoys administrative roles.

The transition back to school was more difficult for Sue than she expected. Most of the other students in her program had at most a handful of years of work experience and she has often felt out of place. Her life has a lot of constraints between family and community obligations that her peers do not have to navigate. She has also felt a disconnect in what counts as knowledge in the academy versus in her previous setting. In the academy, it is about citing research, when in her clinical work, it was about what was effective in practice. She has loved being in the academic setting overall, however, and has really enjoyed giving her curiosity new outlets. She has a very supportive advisor who has affirmed and valued her previous professional experiences and has helped her navigate what has been a large identity shift for her. She has been intentional about staying connected to people and institutions from her past which has helped ground her sense of purpose.

FINDINGS

In the previous chapter, I introduced the twelve returning professionals who participated in this study. I summarized their backgrounds and gave a brief summary of their experience in their doctoral programs. In this section, I will share the insights I gleaned from the stories they shared with me. The first section gives an overview of the most salient findings. That section is followed by three sections to address each research question separately and a fourth section in which I share participant recommendations for advisors, programs and other returning professionals. The main sections begin with an extended quote from one participant whose story illustrates a main theme from the data. That quote will be followed by an in depth exploration of other participant experiences. I will conclude with a summary of the findings before moving on to the final chapter, where I will discuss the importance of and implications of the findings and propose directions for future research.

Summary of Salient Findings

The most salient findings of my research fall into two categories: the experience of liminality and unique tensions experienced by returning professionals. I will briefly explain both of these categories and how they showed up in the stories of my participants. I will then break down my findings according to each of my three research questions.

One of the most salient features of being a returning professional was the sense of being in a liminal space. The concept of a liminal space or state comes from the field of anthropology, originally used to describe rites of passage in tribal societies (van Gennep, 1909). A liminal space occurs in the context of a ritual where a person is passing from one status to another, and involves leaving an old identity behind and embodying a new identity and in the process, inhabiting a new place in society. The participants in this study often conceptualized their time

in doctoral programs as a time in between two states: a past state where they had been working professionals and a future state where they would return to the workforce full time, now with a PhD. Their time in this liminal state was marked by both positive and negative experiences. Sometimes, it felt like a positive time--a season of comparatively less responsibility, more freedom to explore ideas and concepts, and the ability to learn new skills and to be on the cutting edge of research. Other times, it felt like a season of loss and confusion, where their previous confidence in themselves and their skills was diminished. They felt disconnected from their past selves in a way that some experienced as a deconstruction, or a breaking down of their past selves, which some attributed to the socialization process of graduate school. Some felt like graduate school was trying to break them down and reform them into a new self in a way that felt destructive. Others did not attribute this process as intentional but as a product of time, having been disconnected from their previous careers long enough to be rusty and for their professional networks to have become more disparate and less functional over that period of time.

Returning professionals also felt many sources of tension that were directly informed by the existence of a previously formed professional identity. One tension was *Student vs. Professional*: returning professionals felt a conflict between the expectations of being a doctoral student and their previously shaped expectations of themselves as professionals. They often navigated this tension by making intentional choices to “play the student” and “stay in their lane” in order to meet the expectations of faculty and other students. This was often an expected and predictable dynamic, though it could be a source of frustration at times. A second tension that returning professionals experienced was *Academy vs. Industry*: returning professionals noted a difference in the way work was done in their previous jobs and in academia and had to adjust their own sense of professionalism accordingly. They also felt frustrated that the rules of their

program were not spelled out like a contract as in other jobs, and could feel more vulnerable due to the amorphous, flexible and at times, inconsistent processes and procedures within their programs. Lastly, all participants to one degree or another, had to navigate tensions in response to graduate school socialization. Some participants experienced *contrasting socializations* where their previous socialization was different than but not in conflict with academia. For them, the new expectations of graduate school were helpful at times, necessary adjustments to a new setting. For those who intended to pursue careers in academia, these expectations also were teaching them the norms of their new professions. Other participants experienced *conflicting socializations* where their previous socialization was at odds with academic socialization. Some of these participants felt that they were being asked to abandon their previous identity, and that felt very threatening to their overall sense of self.

Being in an “in-between” space created many tensions unique to returning professionals. Their existing professional identities were both sources of those tensions as well as resources to cope with those tensions, as they had wisdom and perspective developed over many years in the professional work force. I turn now to an in-depth look at the data, sharing quotes from participants in order to answer my three research questions.

Research Question 1

How do returning professionals in doctoral programs experience ongoing shifts in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student as it relates to their professional identity?

I'm struggling with [thinking of myself as a professional] now and it's amazing because all the evidence is there that I used to do these things but I kind of feel like I'm in a professional purgatory. A limbo, if you will. But I don't know what the quest is that I have to complete to make it over.

One of the challenges of getting into this space, you leave as a professional and you know who you are and you're clear about who you are and then you come into this space and you still know who you are but there's pushback. There's a desire to reform

you into a different somebody or something... In the process of that reforming, you're pushing back, they're pushing towards you. Instead of coming to a form that's complete, it's an incomplete form that's between two worlds. So you're stuck half as a scholar, because you needed to be the scholar to be in this space, and half as the professional, the part you remember because you've accomplished these things but neither one of them is enough to really get you where you need to go...

That sense of instability is one of my biggest regrets about being in this space because I didn't have that instability before I came here and now, I have that instability. It's sort of like ripping out all the cabinets in your house because you watched a do it yourself show and then realizing you don't have the skills to put them back in there so you're stuck with a kitchen with no cabinets.

For me, it has been a loss of a sense of confidence... because when I finish my program, I'm not gonna be an academic. I may teach, but it will be at a teaching intensive institution. And so it is really a reshaping of your professional identity.

Rosanna had worked for over 16 years in the nonprofit sector before deciding to return to school to get a PhD. She had a variety of work experience that included project management and learning development, as well as overseeing grant funding to community organizations. She is passionate about and dedicated to resourcing underserved communities and had garnered a strong reputation that allowed her to get a lot of things done on behalf of her community. Her goal in pursuing a PhD was to better position herself to advocate for and acquire meaningful resources for her community but her experience in the program has been discouraging. Much of her discouragement has come from feeling that she is in a liminal space, that her identity is now somewhere in between the accomplished professional she remembers being and the academic scholar she is in the process of becoming.

In the extended quote above, Rosanna describes her experience of graduate school as being in a “professional purgatory” and “limbo.” These phrases bring to mind a place of waiting, of being in a holding pattern, or of being incomplete. The idea of purgatory, for those familiar with Catholic doctrine, also carries with it the notion of being held back from completion due to personal failings. Rosanna describes feeling as though she is on a quest to get out of this in

between state, but she is not sure how to move forward. Her experience of this liminal space is also not neutral, as she goes on to describe the pressure she has felt in that space to become something new. She is being “reformed,” another idea that can carry with it the notion of correcting something that was wrong. To be reformed can indicate that the previous form was inadequate or lacking in some substantial way, and Rosanna describes the pressures she has felt in graduate school as an attempt to form her into something she does not want to become. She is “pushing back” on these pressures, but the experience has created the feeling of instability in her and has led to a loss of confidence. She uses the analogy of remodeling a kitchen with the ability to tear out the kitchen cabinets but not enough expertise to put new cabinets in. In this analogy, she is left with a kitchen that does not function as well as it used to and cannot function yet the way it will when it is fully renovated. She is also concerned because the form she is being pressured to take, that of an academic, is not the form that she desires. She had come to her PhD program with the intent to return to her role as an advocate and bridge of support. At this time, she has lost her sense of confidence in the role she used to play, making it difficult for her to imagine returning to it. She has also felt pressure to be formed into an academic, an identity she does not want and will not use in the way that others will, those who are pursuing careers as academics. This liminal space for Rosanna has been one of loss without a clear sense of how to return to the world she came from now that she no longer fits the way she did when she left.

Challenges of Being in Liminal Spaces

Rosanna’s description of her experience creatively and thoughtfully illustrates one of the main themes shared by many participants in terms of the ongoing shifts they experienced when they returned to school. Many of them experienced the shift from being a working professional

to being a graduate student as existing in a liminal space. For many of them, their time in previous professional settings had felt solid and grounded, and in comparison, their time in graduate school felt temporary and unsettled. Not everyone experienced this liminal space as a loss of identity and confidence, as Rosanna did. Not everyone was as accomplished professionally as Rosanna or as grounded in their sense of themselves as professionals, so they did not have as much of a sense of their professional identity being challenged. Even those with less grounding in their professional identity, however, did also feel that graduate school was a liminal space where the rules and expectations were substantially different than what they had become used to in their working lives. Being in a liminal space also came with many benefits, as participants often described a sense of relief and happiness to be in a place where they did not have the pressures and constraints that they had in their professional lives. In the following section, I will look at how other participants described this liminal space and their various reactions to it.

Thomas worked as a professional educator for about seven years. He describes a similar sense as Rosanna of being in a liminal space that he describes as being in “suspended animation.” His experience of being in a liminal space is illustrated by the concerns on his mind being markedly different than they were before graduate school started:

Thomas: Well it’s just a very different frame of mind than being a productive adult, like what everyone becomes after they graduate you’re like, oh, I’ve got to start establishing my home or my family or my career path or... Grad school is kind of suspended animation in some ways, so it's like, oh, care about your readings, care about this project, care about, you know, teaching. You have to treat them differently than you would... I'm kind of in between, like, I was a real adult for a little while. Now I’m doing this thing... and then I'm going to go back into that world, and I’m just kind of hanging in this.

Thomas recognizes a difference in his “frame of mind” from before he started his program, when his concerns were primarily about establishing and managing himself as a “productive adult.”

He remembers thinking about home and family and career and felt like his concerns were the things most people in his stage of life were thinking about. As a graduate student, he thinks about his class work and his responsibilities as a teaching assistant. This shift in topics is in some ways obvious: he is thinking about what he is doing and what he is doing has changed. However, he also references the idea of being in “suspended animation,” as though the things he must be concerned about while a student are less real or less important to him in reality, and that they have less bearing or weight than other things in his life that still have to do with being a productive adult. His experience of the liminal space seems to be that he is concerned with things that are of less consequence than his concerns outside of the liminal space. His “real life” is waiting for his return after his time in graduate school is complete.

Sucre’s experience of being in a liminal space had less to do with being shaped to become a new form the way Rosanna experienced it and more to do with navigating the power dynamics of that liminal space. Sucre was a teacher for over a decade and had been involved in educational activism since early in her career. She came back to school with the desire to reform educational practices and possibly open her own school. She noted power dynamics in her program that she experienced due to being treated not like a faculty member but also not like a student:

Sucre: The power dynamics are weird though. I think the power dynamics are weird in my program, just because we are that in between. We’re not treated like faculty, but we are. We are not treated like students, but then we kind of are sometimes. We’re not given authority. So it’s kind of like this liminal space.

For Sucre, the liminal space was informed by her experience as a graduate student working for the university as a teaching assistant. She mentions in this quote not being treated like she was a faculty member, which for her, was based on her expertise and opinions in the classroom being respected at the same level as they would have been had she been a faculty member. She also

feels that she is more respected than she would be if she were simply a student. Her recognition of the limitations of her authority in the classroom caused a certain amount of distress for her, especially due to the fact that she had experienced more authority in her classrooms during her time as a teacher before graduate school began. She knows what it feels like to have autonomy and authority as a teacher, and she feels the difference in the way she is treated as a teaching assistant who is a teacher but is also a student.

To some participants, their experience of being in a liminal space led to a loss of confidence in themselves as it did for Rosanna. Sue, for example, worked for 15 years as a social worker in a role she loved. She provided direct clinical services for community members and also worked in administrative positions overseeing programs and trainings within her organization. When asked what she missed about being a working professional, Sue noted that she missed feeling like she knew what she was doing and the reputation that she had earned:

Sue: Just knowing what I'm doing. It was easy... And it took a lot to build and to be strong and it was really tough to walk away. I think I know the kind of person I am and I could build that again if I were in a role. I'd feel pretty comfortable. It's just that whole feeling of "this is who I am and this is where I'm supposed to be" just feels a little uncertain now.

For over 15 years, Sue had worked to build her competency and reputation as a social worker and like Rosanna, she felt a sense of loss when she walked away from that role. She also mentions feelings of uncertainty in her role as a graduate student. She is aware she does not know what she is doing in this new role and that feels uncomfortable for her especially because she knows what it feels to be comfortable and confident in her work. Sue expresses more confidence than Rosanna that she could go back to her old role and rebuild her reputation and repair her confidence. This difference may be due in part to Rosanna being in her fifth year in

her program and Sue completing her second and not having had as much time pass since she had been working in her previous capacity.

Carmen, also at the end of her program, reflected a similar concern as Rosanna that being in a liminal space for so long had led to a loss of marketability. She worries about finding a suitable job after she finishes her program:

Carmen: To concentrate on completing my degrees at MSU, I slowed my consulting and related activities for the last 2 years. Now, my networks are rusty... I hesitate even to apply for jobs with my previous skills in facilitating because I haven't used them in so long I feel incompetent. In the process of becoming a researcher, I lost, by atrophy, much of my other professional identity and actual job prospects. I feel...at a loss...for making sense of this turn of events... However, because I mainly focused on my own learning, which was mainly philosophical knowledge & not practical skills—my side consulting wasn't enough—I nurtured my own obsolescence to the actual job market I'm now facing.

Carmen, who had worked as a consultant most recently before starting her program, reflected that she would have a difficult time picking up where she left off because her networks had dissipated and her facilitation skills were rusty. She is afraid that she will not be able to find a job moving in a new direction because the skills she has been focusing on learning in her program are not practical skills, and she does not think the skills she has gained have made her more employable. She is afraid she is stuck in this liminal space, having lost the ability to go back and not seeing many options for moving forward.

Anne had worked for over 13 years in various jobs. Her longest job was working as clerk in an emergency room at a rural hospital which she did for five years. She was very successful in this job, which included the responsibility of transferring patients at her hospital to other hospitals when patients needed critical care that they could not receive at her location. This job was highly intense and often very satisfying, as her ability to network and negotiate with other hospitals meant that lives were literally being saved. Her time in her PhD program felt very

different than her time working in the hospital. During the photo elicitation exercise in our second interview, Anne referenced a picture of a broken down bicycle that captured this sense of being in-between states:

Anne: I kind of feel like this broken down bike. Like, I have use, but not right now. Maybe once I was really great and I could be great again but right now, I'm a little broken down. I need to just rest.

Like Rosanna and Sue, Anne expressed a negative contrast in the way she felt in her previous working life and the way she feels about herself now. Anne, in her current state, feels that she is not as useful as she was in her previous state. Her sense of being less useful seems to come in part at least from her being tired and worn down from her time in the PhD program rather than a loss of identity or pressure to conform to some new expectations. Her comment does illustrate another example of feeling more confident in herself before entering this liminal space, and it is not hard to imagine this difference being very tangible as her previous role included activities that literally saved people's lives.

Ryan came from a career in social work where she provided direct care for troubled youth and later, ran a community outreach program concerned with child abuse prevention. Her shift into graduate education felt overwhelming and she has coped with feelings of inadequacy when she compares herself to other students in her program, many of whom came in with much more research experience and expertise:

Ryan: I think I've recently really tried to focus on only being in a student mode, because like I said, I felt really not confident in my abilities to be a grad student, so I think I've kind of tried to pour myself into cultivating that identity.

Ryan had dealt with the tension of being in a liminal space by consciously operating in student mode, distancing herself from her professional identity. At the time of this interview, she was finishing her third year in the program and was still immersed in classwork, which meant

spending a lot of time with her peers. These ongoing interactions often reinforced her feelings of not fitting in but also served as a means for her to learn how they talked about research and topics in their field. She was hopeful that this conscious immersion into her student identity would help her feel more comfortable as a graduate student and overcome her feelings of not belonging.

For some, entering into this liminal space felt like taking a step backwards in the trajectory of their lives. Michael had worked his way up to a position of considerable expertise in his field, pulling in contracts that were worth \$100 million and obtaining top secret clearance from the Department of Defense. When he left that job, due to it being a toxic work environment, he found a job in higher education that opened up the idea for him obtaining a PhD. At first, both the job and the idea of returning to school felt like steps down for him but he was able to make this adjustment with the understanding that it was the best way to get where he wanted to go in terms of a suitable career:

Michael: Sometimes you gotta take a step backwards to take steps forwards. I think people don't do that as much anymore. Maybe it's an old coal mining mentality. I'm from a coal mining town but it's like, sometimes you pay your dues and then you eat some stuff in order to get ahead. So I'm fine with that.

Michael mentions growing up in a community with a “coal mining” mentality and believes this mentality helped him come to terms with what felt like a regressive professional choice. Michael experienced this challenge as expected and necessary to accomplish greater goals in his life and was not particularly distressed by it. Other participants felt much more vulnerable by taking this step back. Rosanna, whose story we examined at the beginning of this section, was afraid that her choice to go back to school was not going to pay off:

Rosanna: Quite frankly I'm scared, because these are money-making years for me. I have taken five of the most critical years of my life, and left a space where I was well respected, and I am sure by now have been completely forgotten, and transitioned into a

field where I've not had a lot of support or success. And so at this point, it's just horror. Just sheer terror. Although I know I'm very employable, there is the question of, you know, as you get older, it becomes more difficult to find employment because even though you have the skill set, you need to make more money. I'm in a different space, completely different from where I was before.

Rosanna, as illustrated in the beginning of this section, had experienced a loss of confidence and identity when she came to graduate school. Another dynamic she experienced by being in this liminal space was the fear that her decision to pursue a PhD would not pan out financially. She knew that if she had stayed working for these past five years, she would have made a significant amount of money instead of barely breaking even as a graduate student. It has been a financial risk to enter into this liminal space and she is aware that her time in graduate school is happening during "money making" years, as she left her job while she was making considerably more money than she had been earlier in her career.

Benefits of Liminal Spaces

Most participants experienced the shift from being full-time workers to full-time graduate students as entering into a liminal space, a temporary location that could be experienced as a loss of identity and purpose and that came with some sense of risk. The quotes above explored some of those negative elements of being in an in between state. Most participants also affirmed that being in a liminal space also had unique advantages. Thomas in the section above had described feeling like he was in a state of suspended animation in graduate school. He also described graduate school as a "kind of Peter Pan world" that had some very fortunate elements to it:

Thomas: We're lucky and unlucky to be in this suspended kind of Peter Pan world, and there's way more upside than downside. So we're talking a little bit about the negative but it's not like you feel that every moment of every day.

Thomas affirms that his experience of this liminal space has been more positive than negative, and earlier in the interview, he had identified the learning environment and opportunities to work with people who sharpen him as his favorite parts of graduate school:

Thomas: I think you get a much more healthy critical environment than you would if you were just kind of casually learning about stuff. So I think that part is fantastic. Opportunities also, you get so many opportunities both to teach, to work on projects, to be surrounded by other great grad students, I think even more than the faculty sometimes. Their work ethic and their standards and their minds is something that you can't just fall into at most jobs.

Though Thomas feels at times like this world is not as “real” as his life was before and will be after he graduates, he recognizes that this liminal space has provided him opportunities he could not have gotten in other ways. He specifically points out that learning on his own would not afford him the kind of critical engagement he gets in the academic environment. He has also found that being around his fellow graduate students is a unique and valuable dynamic that he had not found in his professional life.

Michael had left an intense and competitive job in the corporate sector to pursue a job that he would find more meaningful. He experienced the liminal space of higher education to be one where he could pursue learning undistracted by other things:

Michael: I liked being able to immerse myself in the study of higher ed, to not be as distracted by other things, to really dive into this, because that was important to me. I want to do it the right way, whatever that is, and I've come to realize there is no right way. But for me the right way was like, “I want to immerse myself in this.”

He had been in a job with high demands and no time to dabble ideas, so he found that graduate education afforded him the ability to take his time while learning and to immerse himself in his studies. The liminal space for him is an intellectual playground.

Similarly to Michael, Carmen has also enjoyed being in a space where learning is able to be her primary activity. When she was exploring the idea to get a PhD, an advisor of hers told her that she would really benefit from having this kind of focused time to think and learn:

Carmen: He's like, you need to go get a PhD, if for no other reason than that you need three to four years to think unbothered by client deadlines and things like that.

Carmen is motivated by a love of learning and enjoys challenging herself intellectually. Being in this liminal space, though not without its challenges and the fear that she mentioned in an earlier quote, has afforded her the opportunity to focus more on her own learning agenda.

Sucre also found that being in graduate school full-time has had its advantages. She brought up another theme that several other participants also mentioned, which is the unstructured nature of her education:

Sucre: I like not having deadlines... My processing is just very different than traditional schooling, so I like the fact that it's not traditional. I like the structure of a lot of course work. I like that a lot of it is discussion based. A lot of it is project based, learning based, it's community based. I like that the learning happens outside of the classroom too. I like it. The autonomy to build my research with little pieces of what I'm learning. So, all the learning has been fantastic... being able to be a decision maker in my own learning is pretty cool and being able to write about what I want... I like getting paid to learn.

Sucre, as described in the previous section, came to graduate school as an educational activist wanting to challenge some of the existing learning paradigms in the American educational system. She mentions in the quote above that she has enjoyed the lack of deadlines and the ability to be autonomous in determining her own research agenda. She has met many obstacles in the educational system, some of which will be explored in later sections, but she has also found that some of her values for being a decision maker in her own learning have been realized in her time in her program.

Ryan's experience of the liminal space also included the benefits of flexibility and autonomy:

Ryan: In a way, it's nice because it is very flexible in some ways. You don't have to be in the office from 9 to 5. You can set your own schedule in some ways... I have an assistantship so I have tasks that I need to do, but at the same time with classes, you can also find something that you're interested in and learn more about it, like go off on little tangents that maybe you couldn't do as much in a professional setting. So, I like the freedom to be intellectually stimulated and follow something that catches your eye.

Ryan compares the flexible schedule of being a graduate student to the inflexibility of the traditional job, where people show up to work in their offices during the standard business hours of 9 to 5. She has responsibilities for her assistantship that need to be completed but it is up to her to determine when many of those things happen. She also talks about enjoying the freedom she has to pursue her intellectual interests, and like Sucre, enjoys being in control of her own learning. Further, Ryan makes the point that it would be harder to follow her intellectual curiosity in a professional setting where she would likely not have as much freedom to learn things she was interested in. Professional jobs generally have specific goals and timelines that do not allow for much autonomy in learning.

In summary, the findings of my first research question indicated that many participants experienced the shift from being a full-time worker to a full-time doctoral student as entering and existing in a liminal space. For many, the liminal space felt uncomfortable, a place where they felt less grounded and sure of themselves than they had in their professional spaces. Several of them experienced a sense of loss of identity and confidence, while others merely experienced a sense of dislocation where they knew they had been temporarily displaced. At other times, participants experienced the positive dynamics of being in a liminal space, where they were relatively free from the constraints and expectations they experienced in the world of professional work. They were happy to use this freedom to pursue their intellectual interests and engage in meaningful activities that would have been harder if not impossible outside of this liminal space. I turn now to my second research question.

Research Question 2

What tensions do returning professionals experience in their role as graduate students that are informed by their existing professional identity?

This second research question was an attempt to explore how participants experienced tensions in their role as graduate students that were unique to being returning professionals. Their existing sense of themselves as professionals created a different type of tension within the role of being graduate students that they would not have had without those years of work experience. Participants identified two main tensions informed by their professional identities. The first tension was that many of them found themselves having to shift between playing the role of a student and playing the role of a professional. They could identify at least two sets of paradigms that guided their behavior, and depending on the context, they were often conscious of having to choose which behaviors were appropriate for that context. The second tension was identifying and coping with what they perceived to be different expectations of how work should be done in the academic setting compared to their previous professional settings. These expectations could be standards of safety or efficiency or norms around communication. Expectations also seemed more clear in their previous settings in terms of deadlines and processes and there were more structures in place for holding those in authority accountable to those expectations. Many participants also noted a difference in the type of work that was valued. Both of these tensions will be explored in depth in the sections below.

Which Hat Am I Wearing? Playing the Student

We were doing a group project a couple of weeks ago and sometimes I'm a very visual person and I've been used to like, well hey, let's draw this out. And I just said hey, does anyone mind, there's only four people in our class, does anyone mind if we start putting some of these ideas on the board? And it was like yeah, go ahead. And I suddenly found myself feeling like I was facilitating a team meeting. I'm like, oh what am I doing? I had this moment where I'm standing up here with chalk. I'm not the teacher. I'm not the TA. I'm one of four people in the class...

And I remember looking at my professor for some kind of sign or approval or disapproval. Are you going to tell me to sit down? Because this isn't my role... Internally it gets confusing and I probably sound like I just go into places and take over. That was odd for me a little bit because I usually find myself trying to be more reserved and if I feel like I've talked too much in a class I try to shut up... Yeah, I try not to start everything with "in my experience" or, "I think about all these things". There's a constant filter... I think for the most part, relationships are strong enough that people are good with that, but it's something that I watch myself a lot because I just, I don't want to stand out.

Sue came to her PhD program with a wealth of experience and expertise. Having worked for over 15 years in the field of social work, she had provided direct clinical services to many families and individuals. She had also worked in administrative positions that had given her leadership experience and the ability to manage programs and people. Her transition back to school had been unsettling at first. She experienced feelings of not belonging and worried about her ability to be successful in her graduate education. She was very aware of her previous experiences no longer being as relevant to those around her, a feeling that was mitigated by having a very supportive advisor who would talk with her directly and openly about this shift in roles and responsibilities.

The story Sue tells in the quote above captures some of the tension that she experienced as a returning professional. She found herself acting as a facilitator in a group discussion, a role she had played many times as a team leader in her previous organization. She had developed the skills of gathering and processing feedback from a group of people who were working together on a project, and the interaction in her small class was so reminiscent of this dynamic that she naturally took on the role that she was used to playing. She describes the feeling of catching herself in this moment and feeling very self-conscious. She worries about how the professor will view her actions, ready to take her seat if the professor gives some indication that her actions were out of line. She worries how her fellow students will see her, as she later goes on to share

her awareness of the way she contributes during class. She wants to fit in, which for her means staying in the student role. Her previous experience, however, is still alive and well under the surface, and at times, she accidentally moves outside of the student role. She did not know what her professor or her fellow students actually thought during that situation described above. What she was aware of was the tension between the expectations that guide her behavior as a student and the expectations that used to guide her behavior in her previous life as a social worker responsible for leading teams of colleagues.

Like Sue, many other participants in my study described experiences when the expectations for how to operate as a graduate student conflicted with the expectations they had held as working professionals. The section below highlights this tension in general where participants were aware of operating out of different modes, at times centered in their role as a student and at other times centered in their role as a professional. They often experienced a sense of tension between which role they were playing at which time, and many of them described having to make conscious decisions to shift from one role to the next. This could impact the ways they worked with fellow students and with faculty, as they felt the need to “play the student” and hold back comments or change expectations for themselves. Not everyone experienced this as a negative dynamic, but it was something that most participants were very aware of and that required effort and intentionality to navigate.

Michael, who had worked in a corporate environment as well as in higher education, made conscious adjustments to when and how he spoke his mind to faculty so as to not appear disrespectful:

Michael: So sometimes if I'm with a group of faculty members, I feel like I should play the student, because I feel like if I try and speak up or whatever, it might be seen as disrespectful, it might be seen as inappropriate, it might just make them uncomfortable and not know how to handle the situation because it's not as common or whatever. At the

same time, I try and not just sit there with my hands folded in the corner and be super submissive or anything like that, but yeah, I try to respect that.

He is aware of making a choice to “play the student,” meaning that he is aware that he could have spoken to these faculty members from a different position. If he had met a particular faculty member while he had still been working as an administrator in higher education, their relationship and their communication would have been different. Motivated by his respect for his position as a graduate student, he chose to moderate how he communicated with faculty to match their contextual expectations of him. Like Sue’s story above, where she felt concern about how her professor viewed her choice to facilitate the group discussion, Michael felt that faculty might view him as being disrespectful if he spoke up in a certain way. He thought it might make them uncomfortable if he chose to communicate with them in a way that differed from their expectations of him. This dynamic of staying in a more submissive stance with faculty did not seem to cause him distress; it did not feel like a threat to his identity or confidence. He may have held back some of his thoughts and opinions or voiced them in a less direct way than he would have in another setting, but he seemed very willing and able to stay in the position of a student.

Peter also recognized a hierarchical relationship with professors, but felt he was able to navigate it differently than other students because he, like Michael, had worked with faculty members in his previous position.

Peter: One thing I noticed between the relationships between other students in my program and professors and upper staff is that it was definitely more of a hierarchical relationship there whereas I had been in meetings and stuff with academics at U of M for like four years, right? So I didn’t see them necessarily as like, oh, you’re a professor. It’s like you’re a professor, I’m a student but we have a working relationship, right? So I need stuff from you, you need stuff from me... There’s always that boundary but I feel like I had a different attitude towards those relationships than others did.

Peter mentions that he had worked with academics, both faculty and administrators in higher education, in one of his previous jobs. He had engaged with them as a colleague, and he is aware of the difference in interactions with faculty now, who only know him as a graduate student. He has a very clear memory in his mind of what it felt like to interact with faculty in a different context and realizes that it is only the context that changes the nature of the interactions. For him, this allows him to approach faculty in his program with a different attitude than the other students in his program, most of whom did not work before starting the program. They have only related to faculty as students, first as undergraduate students and now as graduate students. Peter recognizes, much like Michael, that he has to recognize his place in the hierarchy and that there are contextual expectations that inform how he relates to faculty as a graduate student. He makes the choice to stay in his student role when interacting with faculty and observes the expected boundaries.

Carmen found that working for her advisor brought this tension to the foreground, where she experienced feeling treated less like a colleague and more like a student depending on what kind of work she was being asked to do:

Carmen: I found that working for my advisors is not so great because I do expect to be treated and I am treated like a colleague with them when I'm in the student capacity because they totally respect my skills and background. When I'm *working* for them, they sort of tell me what to do or expect me to take on things that just make their lives easier. And I'm like, no, I'm still a colleague and you told me that you wanted me to take this apprenticeship because I have independent skills, so I don't really understand the way you're treating me now. So, I've decided enough. And we've all mutually decided that I would never work for them again.

Carmen had worked as an independent consultant as one of her jobs before starting her program. In fact, she continued to have contractual work during her time in graduate school, and it is possible that keeping one foot in that world helped keep her grounded in her sense of herself as a professional. She knows she has valuable skills and is using those skills in her work for her

advisor, and she expects to be treated like a colleague no matter what type of work she is doing or her payroll title. It seems in her experience, her advisors were able to treat her like a colleague more consistently when supporting her independent research than when they were overseeing her work on their behalf. Their solution to this problem was an agreement that she would not do work for them to avoid this uncomfortable mismatch of expectations where she felt they did not respect her autonomy enough in her work for them.

Ed, who worked for over 40 years in software development, noted that a project in class would not have met industry standards but when he brought this concern up to his professor, it was not received well:

Ed: Some of the code, again, having worked in product development, products that were going to be used by lots of users, the code, the software and all that I've seen developed as part of the research, it's not ready... It's not very good.

Meg: So how vocal are you about your opinion? Like to say, this isn't actually going to work for people who want to use it?

Ed: The professor wasn't very receptive to that, and wanting to survive the PhD, I didn't rock the boat too much. So that was one of the main struggles I had.

Ed felt frustrated about having to use a different standard for his work. He reflected on a project that he knew would not meet the standards of his industry and when he voiced his opinion to his professor, it was not well received. He recognized, as one in a liminal space, that this was a time he would have to "play the student" so as not to "rock the boat." As the most experienced person in my pool of participants, he carried with him over 40 years of experience, and it was difficult for him to "shut off" his personal professionalism.

Participants' experience of this tension between expectations was often located in their role as graduate assistants. The type of tension they felt and the intensity of that tension was informed by what type of work they were doing and what type of work experience they had

before starting their programs. Participants held three different types of assistantships. One was an administrative assistantship, which could include clerical work or supporting academic programs. The second was a teaching assistantship, which could include preparing a syllabus and teaching a class. The third was a research assistantship, which generally meant being assigned to one particular faculty member or to a faculty member's lab. Students with research assistantships were often working for their dissertation advisor, which meant that their advisor was overseeing both their independent research as well as operating as a supervisor to their work on the advisor's research projects. At other times, students would have one faculty member who was their dissertation advisor and a second faculty member who was supervising their work on that second faculty member's research.

Michael, for example, was working in an administrative assistantship where he was helping other graduate students apply for grants that would help them fund their independent research projects. In his previous career, he had worked as a grant writer that brought in considerable amounts of money for his company. He noticed that the students he was assigned to help often did not understand or appreciate his expertise:

Michael: I've written grants. I've been on projects for hundreds of millions of dollars. I think I can help you write your summer research development fellowship grant for 2000 dollars. But then there's a part of me that's like, [Michael], no. Get over yourself... you're not in that environment anymore. Nobody cares. I can hold my CV and my resume experience up to somebody's face and tell them to read it. And to some level, it doesn't matter because I'm a graduate student. That's my identity. The previous experience and stuff doesn't really matter. It should, and it helps me in certain ways, it comes out, but people don't see me like that anymore.

Michael recognized that his primary identity in this context is as a graduate student, and that it was not reasonable for him to expect people to care about or value his previous experience, even when it was directly informing his performance of the duties of his assistantship. At times, he feels upset or that his ego has been bruised by the lack of recognition of his expertise, but he

chooses to let go of his ego and continues to “play the student” as he mentioned in an earlier quote above.

Teaching assistants who had professional experience as teachers often felt treated like students, which to them meant having more oversight and structure than they felt necessary.

Anne, who had worked as an adjunct faculty before starting her program, noted that she felt the most like a grad student when she was teaching because of the amount of oversight:

Anne: I very much felt like a grad student [when I was] teaching. We have a lot of professional training and hoops and hurdles and expectations of us. You know, we're very watched by our first year writing or program director for the teaching... I wouldn't say it's like surveillance, but they're there to guide us and teach us. And even though I've taught for some years before this, that wasn't necessarily recognized because we do things so different here. So that felt a little annoying sometimes, where it's like, I don't need to be babied, I don't need my hand held, I can just go teach.

Anne viewed some of the “hoops and hurdles” of being a teaching assistant as too much hand holding. As one who had taught professionally in a higher education setting, she was already well prepared to perform the duties assigned to her as a teaching assistant. She understood that the training and guidance were necessary for those who had not taught before but expressed that she wished her previous experience had been recognized and affirmed in some way. Her years of college teaching feel invisible, as she is being treated as if they did not exist.

Sucre had worked for over ten years as a teacher, and, additionally, felt that neither her teaching expertise nor her cultural knowledge were recognized in her role as a teaching assistant:

Sucre: For example, this last semester, I was doing field instruction on languages that I am a native speaker of. I grew up speaking Spanish and French. And those are the world languages that I was instructing. Nobody else, not the mentor teachers or the [pre-service] teachers, none of them had that as a native language or their culture. And none of them had 12 years of teaching experience. I think one mentor teacher had like ten. And I was still pushed back against on things that I saw as cultural stereotyping. It was things that I saw as one-sided views about cultural and language.

She was aware that she has more teaching experience than the pre-service teachers she is in charge of evaluating. Pre-service teachers are undergraduate students who are completing their year-long internship after four years of coursework. Sucre also has more experience than the mentor teachers, who are the teachers that supervise the pre-service teachers in the classroom during their internships. Knowing she had more experience than any of the people she was working with created a sense of significant frustration for her when her expertise was not recognized. Since her expertise also involves teaching about her own culture, she was even more upset when her critiques about the way people were teaching about her culture were not respected. Though the frustration about her cultural critique not being respected is not about professional identity per se, it is impossible to separate Sucre's sense of who she is as a teacher and who she is as a native speaker of Spanish and French. Additionally, because she positions herself as an educational activist, her pedagogical critique is also central to who she is and how she identifies herself as a professional. Sucre's professional identity is being challenged on several different levels here: her sense of self as a teacher, her strong beliefs about how learning should happen, and her cultural identity as it is expressed and embodied in the classroom.

Conversely, Peter, who did not have professional experience as a teacher, felt treated more like a professional in his role as a teaching assistant. When asked if he felt treated like a professional in his assistantship, he replied:

Peter: I think so. So, it always changed at first because I think professors, when they get new TAs, they have that, "we're establishing a boundary here." Like you're my TA, I'm the professor. This is also kind of tapping into that difference between people who go straight in and have that more, like oh, you're a professor and I'm just a grad student. I think professors enact that boundary but then once they get to know me and they realize like, okay, I'll go above and beyond and I'll submit things ahead of time... Then that kind of dropped a little bit and it was more of that personal relationship. But always at first, it was like test the water a little bit. How's this going to go? And then after a couple weeks, once the relationship fleshed out a little bit, it was great.

Peter felt that he was treated like a graduate student at first, as in, one without teaching experience, which in Peter's case was true. Over time, he felt that he was able to establish a working relationship with his professors where they loosened the boundaries with him, recognizing him as one capable of more responsibility than his peers without professional experience. Peter, having no professional teaching experience, would not have had an expectation that his work experience should allow him to have less oversight because his work experience was not as a teacher. Rather, he relied on general skills that he honed as a professional that informed his work ethic and his ability to relate to faculty members in a collegial way, which was explored in a quote above. He felt treated like a professional in his role as a teaching assistant because of this recognition of his maturity, while those with teaching experience felt treated less like professionals as teaching assistants because their expectations of enacting the role of a teacher were markedly different than his. However, in all of these cases, participant's previous work experience did inform their expectations and experience of their roles as graduate assistants in some way.

In his program, Steve worked as a research assistant and he had spent several years managing a lab, experience he expected would directly inform his work as an RA. Steve, in his role as an RA, had concerns with the difference in laboratory protocols and the impact on the quality of data from his lab work in the academic setting:

Steve: The paper trail is not good. If you patent something in science, you need to do good laboratory practices to a really high standard. Those labs, or when you're doing those experiments, it'd be like when I worked back in industry. It'd be more like that. Because in a research lab [in academia], you put some of your methods and your results in the paper and that's a sufficient enough paper trail that you can go back and audit your lab notebooks and some other stuff, too. But the paper should be robust enough that it's not, I don't want to call it quasi-auditable, but that's sufficient enough.

In his previous role, Steve was responsible for meticulous record keeping and safety auditing. His experience of what he calls “good laboratory practices” are informed by his years of experience managing a lab and he sees a distinct difference in the practices observed in the lab as a graduate student. Steve, like Thomas, did not seem to take this difference as an affront to his professional identity, but he did notice, as Thomas and Alan did, that he had to make a conscious effort not to live out of the standard that he once upheld in his job.

A major theme that many participants mentioned was the tension that they felt operating in two different modes and at times, being conscious of shifting between these modes. Many participants spoke of their awareness of having to make intentional choices about how to position themselves depending on context. They chose to “play the student” in order to play the role expected of them at the time. This balancing act was accepted by most participants as a natural outcome of their choice to return to graduate school, though some felt it as more of a tiring and frustrating dynamic. This tension was often experienced most saliently in the context of their graduate assistantships, though their experiences differed widely depending on the type of assistantship they held.

Tensions Between Expectations in Industry vs. Academia

When I’m collaborating with someone, I have to scale back, obviously, because I’m very meticulous. I like to do things a certain way and I like to do them right and get them done that way. And that’s kind of my personal professionalism. If you are going to do it, you do it right. I don’t like slop... And a big thing is learning to shut that off. It’s not going to get done that way... Maybe you both have great ideas for getting this done and you have both perspectives, but you’ve got to get it funded, or is anyone going to let us have the time to do this, that kind of stuff. So you can push to a certain extent but then you’ve got to shut off...

Because of the level of flexibility that is in academia and how you can approach projects [is different than if] you have a project that needs to be done if you’re a plumber or something like that. The end result has to be this. So you guys can have different ideas, work with different materials, and stuff like that. But you discuss because that is it. That’s not the case with working on these projects...

So that's learning to go with the flow and just sit back and let things happen and you put in your say knowing that what you say isn't going to matter. Because also, you're still low on the wrung as a grad student anyway. That's pretty huge. Versus when you have a professional position, if someone comes to you for advice for a project, that's because you have a specific thing that you need to do or a specific skill you've got to do. You know you've got to add to this or they wouldn't come to you anyway.

Alan's experience of his doctoral program was informed by his experiences working in a corporate environment that had very clear rules and processes for how work should be done. He has a very pragmatic attitude toward work that has also been shaped by his early life experiences, which included dropping out of high school and taking what many would consider to be a nontraditional path to higher education. Work for Alan was a matter of providing resources and stability for himself, and those clear expectations felt like more assurance that he could predict the outcome of his efforts. He found that the expectations in academia are often much less clear to him than they were in his previous jobs and it has been a source of frustration.

In the quote above, Alan makes the analogy of a plumber collaborating with another plumber to fix a plumbing problem. The objective is clear, though the two plumbers may disagree on the best means and materials to accomplish their goal. When collaborating on a project in academia, Alan's expectations for how to approach the project are informed by his sense of personal professionalism. He finds that he often has to shut his personal professionalism off in order to collaborate in the academic space. He attributes this dynamic to a mismatch in the expectations of those he is working with as well as to external constraints over which he has no control. The project may be worth doing but not able to find funding, or he may not be given enough time to accomplish the project according to his own standards, standards which were shaped in his previous professional environment. He mentions feeling too "low on the wrung" as a graduate student to be able to set the terms of the work he wants to do and has

had to learn to “go with the flow.” The relative lack of clear structures and processes have caused a consistent source of distress for Alan.

How should work be done? Like Alan, other participants also noted a lack of clarity in their graduate education that made it harder to navigate than in their previous jobs, where the process and structures were often much more clear. This difference impacted their ability to negotiate the expectations of their programs, in terms of what classes they could take or what kinds of experiences they could find for themselves. If something about their program was not working for them, they did not have enough information about the system itself to be able to advocate for themselves. Several participants mention this dynamic as a large source of frustration as well as leading to a sense of learned helplessness. When trying to understand the program timelines or how to acquire sources of funding, the processes and metrics used to make decisions were not made clear to them. In their previous work, those processes and metrics were much more clear, which meant they could hold their supervisors accountable to using those processes and metrics. In academia, they felt much more vulnerable to the individual preferences of their advisors or supervisors.

Carmen for example, noted a lack of clarity into the process of her academic program, which would have helped her know what opportunities were negotiable or how to advocate for herself:

Carmen: It would have been so much more helpful if from the beginning, [the program coordinator] had said, “Well let’s see if we can do that,” rather than “No, we don’t allow that.” Even if the eventual answer was no, we would have learned a lot along the way about *why* the answer was no and therefore what could have been some alternative plan b’s and c’s around it. But just by getting a no, you have no idea of what the mechanisms and structures are behind that. So, you’re like okay, guess I’m just going to wait until my fourth year when now I’m in a crunch spot and don’t have options.

Without knowing the “mechanisms and structures” that dictate how decisions were made, Carmen felt at a loss to negotiate for herself. Later in the interview, she specifically mentions wanting to know how many independent study credits she can take and having a great deal of trouble finding a clear answer. As one who had been working as a consultant and an independent contractor, Carmen was used to being able to create plans for her work that made sense to her, as long as she also met the needs of her clients. The structures of her program were invisible to her and she felt frustrated by the lack of access to information.

This lack of information about process also made it difficult for some students to know what to expect in terms of scheduling key events as they attempted to advance through the program. Michael received mixed signals about when he would be allowed to schedule his proposal defense, which created frustration for him and illustrated his lack of agency:

Michael: There's a lot of mixed signals and things like that. I'm defending my proposal on July 9. For the first two years, probably until like a few months ago, I had always heard you defend in May or you defend in August and that's the only time you ever defend, and if you don't do it then, you're not going to do it. And so when I realized I wasn't going to be able to defend in May, I was like well, shit what does that mean? Am I going to get delayed? What's that mean? Nobody had an answer. Some people would be like oh yeah, you'll probably just have to wait, and then when I talked with [my advisor] more, he was like no, it's fine. But you still don't know. I'm not able to control my own progress...

He had heard from some sources that he was limited to two main times when he could defend his dissertation proposal, a key milestone to advancing in his program. In talking to his advisor, he realized that there were other options, which was good news. However, realizing that he had been operating under wrong information gave him pause. He realized that he could have been making a different timeline for himself, and even though the timeline he was on was the one that suited him, it seemed to create a sense of uncertainty about other things that he might not know. If he was wrong about these parameters, what other misinformation might he have? Having been

in a high pressure corporate job, he is used to structures being more concrete, which gave him more of a sense of control and confidence that he was making sound decisions.

Sucre described feeling on her own to navigate her program when she expected more help from her advisor. She points out that she is depending on her advisor to let her know the rules, but she has not gotten as much as she needs and still feels very much on her own:

Sucre: We always have to adhere to someone else's rules. And we are also on our own to figure out those rules ... I just don't understand, maybe there needs to be a school to teach how to do advising or to do committee work. Because if you are not going to help me navigate this PhD life, what are you doing as an advisor?

Later in the interview, Sucre gave a concrete example of how not knowing the rules of the program or department impacted her. She noted that the qualifications for obtaining funding were not clear, which led to uncertainty as to how to be competitive for funding opportunities:

Sucre: The money is definitely one thing. Because the options are inequitable already, right? They give two university fellowships: these people don't have to work the first year and the last year. So, those are the people who are set, right? And then the rest of us have to fight, compete, well, they say we have to compete but there is no rubric and we never get feedback. And so, we don't quite know how the competing happens because we don't get feedback. [My college] has a couple of fellowships throughout the summer but they don't really tell us what makes you not qualified or qualified. And I've seen people turn in work that I felt was horrible, poorly written, a lot of errors, illogical and I've seen those people win. And then I've seen people that write really great papers and not get the money. And so, the money is a really, really big part of it.

For Sucre, the financial resources have been a source of stress for her since she started in her program. Her original offer for funding had changed once she got to MSU and she has felt very financially vulnerable, especially since she took a large pay cut in order to be a full-time student. Already feeling vulnerable, when she was not given any feedback about why she was not chosen for additional funding, it hit a sensitive nerve. It leaves open the possibility that funding is being distributed in some way that requires "secret knowledge" that she does not have access to. Coupled with her feeling that her advisor is not offering her much concrete guidance, she feels

that other students are more competitive for funding because they have more knowledge about the process.

Like Sucre, Rosanna also noted a lack of consistency in how rules were applied and felt that she had been intentionally cut off from resources for personal reasons:

Rosanna: Now, there are some people who have been in our department that are chosen people and when I say chosen, I mean, the rules do not apply to them. The rules in grad school are just fluid. They apply to some people and not to others. For example, some programs will fund you for a certain number of years and beyond that, they say they won't fund you. I know several instances where people have been funded well beyond those times. And others have not in similar situations. So that has been a point of frustration. Particularly, I realized that part of the reason why I felt I stopped receiving or I wasn't eligible to receive funding, a lot of it has to do with... the word escapes me. Politics, the politics of it all. And so I remember I had an instance with one person which was not my fault but before I knew it, this person had initiated this (I love Chimamanda Adichie, *The power of a single story*), they had initiated a single story about me that had snowballed and had gone throughout the department and so I found that when I started to apply for things, I didn't get them.

Rosanna had reason to believe that she was blocked from funding opportunities for political reasons. She mentions feeling that a negative story about her had been told by someone who had a personal grudge against her, and that others believed this narrative about her. She was consequently cut off from financial resources and believes this narrative to be the reason why. She sees example of other students who are being given better treatment than she is, and these "chosen people" are given more resources and opportunities. She blames politics and perceives that the rules are being applied according to politics not fair and equitable policies. Rosanna is not aware of any place she can take her concerns of being treated unfairly.

Several participants mentioned incidents of favoritism in how advisors treated certain advisees, and remarked that in other sectors of society, there seem to be more protections for employees in professional setting than there were for graduate students in higher education. The level of uncertainty and even bias they experienced in their programs over how resources were

dispersed would be unacceptable in their previous jobs. Alan mentioned concerns about the relative lack of protection from differential treatment of graduate students by their advisors:

Alan: The personal treatment between supervisor and supervisee is like, you couldn't get away with anything that goes on [in my department]... I worked in the corporate world. We had dealt with enough lawsuits whether it was based on gender, race, or something like that. And you can't get away with... showing this level of favoritism to different people, and that happens regularly in our department.

Alan explained that an additional difficulty in addressing these concerns in an academic context is that advisors are gate keepers for future opportunities well beyond graduate school, and he was aware that addressing concerns might limit access in the future:

Alan: You don't say anything. It's like, if you say anything, you are screwed... Usually, when you hook up for PhD's, you are hooking up with someone who is going to be in the same field of work that you are. They've been into it a lot longer and they are going to have all the connections. You're with them because you want to make their connections too and maintain that connection. Very few don't maintain their connections with their former lab mates and advisor and so forth. It's like they are the springboard. You may end up doing something different, but you've made those connections. So, if you plan to stay in that world you can't poison that relationship at all.

In Alan's previous professional experience, he had a human resources department to whom he could have complained about being treated unfairly. He does not see a parallel in higher education. He does not see a place to take his concerns, and in his second quote, he explains part of the reason why. His advisor is a key resource to Alan's attempts to network in his field and in that way, he is beholden to his advisor as long as plans to stay in the same field. He feels he must keep a good working relationship with his advisor despite being treated unfairly in order to maintain access to the opportunities and resources that he will need even after he graduates from his program and is no longer being supervised by his advisor. The influence of his advisor is a resource he will need during his time as a graduate student but that influence extends well beyond graduation. Alan feels that risking the loss of that influence by complaining about unfair treatment would not be worth it to him in the long run. Dynamics like this certainly exist in

other sectors of society, including the type of corporate environment that Alan came from. However, he experiences a greater sense of vulnerability in academia than he did in his professional life before graduate school.

In Ed's experience in his lab, he noted that students in the lab who shared the same nationality as their advisor seemed to get more support:

Ed: There were the, I'll just call it cadre, the four of us who were not [from the same country as our advisor], but I was the only US. The [other three] were international also. And the four of us, we... got talking and we hadn't really talked about this prior, but we all expressed the same thing, that we thought that there was some ethnic bias on the part of our professor where the students [who were from his country] got more support, were pushed through faster. I had felt, okay, is it me? Is it because I'm different in some way? Is it the fact that I'm substantially older than he is? There's something going on there. So you know, I just let it go and all. But then when we got talking, they expressed exactly the same thing. So now I have brought up to the department.

Similar to Alan, Ed noted a sense of vulnerability to the personal preferences and biases of his advisor. This quote from Ed further illustrates the uncertainty that returning professionals may feel when they perceive they are being treated differently than other students. Ed, being in his 60s, thought at first that it might be his age that was an issue for his advisor. In discussing his feelings with other students in the lab who also did not share the same nationality as his advisor, he discovered that they had experienced a similar dynamic. He took a risk to share his feelings and frustrations with his lab-mates, and he was grateful to find them to be a source of support and camaraderie and to be able to validate his experience. Many graduate students may not be willing to open up to others, finding there to be too much competition or risk involved.

Returning professionals may feel, as explored directly above, that the processes and structures of higher education are less clear than those they experienced in their job settings. This lack of clarity can lead to feelings of frustration and a lack of agency when trying to navigate those structures or trying to advocate for themselves. They can also be more vulnerable

to the preferences and biases of their advisors or other faculty who are stakeholders in their programs and their futures. These feelings of vulnerability may stand out more to returning professionals than to students who have not had work experience because returning professionals know what it is like to work in an environment that has more certainty and more avenues for protection and holding their superiors accountable to shared standards.

What kind of work is valued? Another way in which participants experienced the difference between the professional cultures of the academy and their former industries was that each context expects and rewards different end products. In industry, the products were determined by how well an idea was implemented and if it worked as planned. Social workers implemented programs and then looked at how that program impacted a community. Engineers built things and then looked at how well that system worked. In academia, many participants experienced that the products that mattered most are publications in peer-reviewed journals. Many participants expressed frustration at this contrast, feeling at times like their knowledge about what works in the field was not as respected as published research. This disconnect between theory and practice often left them feeling like their sources of knowledge and therefore their previous life experience was not valued and at times was invisible to those in the academy.

Sue, coming from a background in the field of social work, reflected on the switch she needed to make with highlighting data from journals instead of her field experience:

Sue: The transition to thinking about what's in a journal article first before thinking what are people doing in practice first, that's been really tough for me. It's not natural. It's completely not natural. My method of practice is to find out what other communities are doing. Find out how this works.

Sue identified a tension between the kind of knowledge that counts as authoritative in her practice as a social worker and in her studies. She is used to leading with her experience of what methods are working and what other communities are finding to be effective in their practice. It

has been a shift for her to think about findings in peer-reviewed articles as her primary source of knowledge. She mentioned in an earlier quote being mindful not to lead with, “in my experience” because she knows her experience is anecdotal and even if the research supports her experience, she cannot support an argument in a class discussion or in a paper with her anecdotes. She does not necessarily experience her experience and the research to be at odds; rather, she is experiencing a shift in what counts as authoritative in the academic context.

Sucre also noted this preference for peer reviewed journals but it impacted her as a writer. She felt that her professional identity as a writer was being constrained by the expectations in academia. She felt pressured to publish articles in peer reviewed journals, which was at odds with her identity as well as her professional goals.

Sucre: I specifically wanted to publish in books because I’m a writer... That’s who I am. And I’ve been told by several people, no, you’ve got to publish articles and be peer reviewed. And I’m like, the book chapters are peer reviewed... And I’m like, what I’m doing? I believe in my own work. I don’t have enough people that believe in my work in the way that I need them to in order to feel supported.

As a writer, and as one who was not considering a career in academia, Sucre felt that her goals for the type of writing and the type of publishing were not supported. She does not need peer reviewed journal articles to advance in her career, as do those who are pursuing careers in academia. People in her program, however, seem to be pushing her toward outputs that do not align with what she wants to do or who she feels she is as a writer.

Ryan, who like Sue, also worked as a social worker, felt that the academic emphasis on theory fell short of real world application:

Ryan: My master’s was very much [building] skills, you’re going to have an internship, all that kind of thing. And so I knew it would be different in a PhD program but I didn’t realize how. It’s really fascinating to me to have very heavy theoretical classes but then sometimes you’re like, how do we take this information that we’re learning and use it in the real world with people? And so, sometimes I think there is that disconnect.

Ryan experienced a disconnect between theory and application in her class work that frustrated her at times. In her work experience as someone who implemented programs in communities, she knows the value of the application of knowledge. Like Sue, she is not discounting the value of the knowledge produced in the academic setting, but she sees limitations of theory that does not produce an impact by being used by people in the “real world.” Ryan does not imagine herself in a faculty position or working in academia, and so her orientation to her learning from the beginning has been to apply what she learns to help others. This orientation, informed both by what she had done in the past and what she hopes to do in the future, would create some tension in a class with a heavy theoretical emphasis.

Not every participant felt as frustrated by this tension between the outputs valued in the “real world” and the outputs valued in academia. Steve, for example, recognized this tension, but accepted the difference in expectations relatively easily:

Steve: Yeah, you don’t publish papers in industry. So like, you made this new product but you don’t get any research credit for that. But not many people do research and the next year, it makes them \$20 million. Different industries or different fields vary, weigh things differently, so if you don’t care about that, I’ll just do whatever you care about. Which [in academia] is papers. Publications.

It did not feel frustrating for Steve to focus on publications instead of working on research that earned his company a great deal of money. He was able to identify what was valued in the setting he was in and simply shifted his focus accordingly. Steve was a participant that had a very fluid sense of professional identity and in fact, affirmed that he did not want his identity to be wrapped up in his profession. This psychological distance from his work may have served as a buffer from the types of frustrations that other experienced when their expectations of themselves and their work did not align with their environment.

A few participants felt that the work they produced in the academic space was viewed as less “real” than the work they produced while in their jobs before graduate school. Carmen expressed the sentiment that the work she was doing while a graduate student was not valued enough:

Carmen: I’ve actually experienced some insulting ways to honor my professional expertise too. It’s bizarre when it happens. So [name], my major professor or I guess my academic advisor, does see my professional expertise and that I’m very independent. I’m very productive. And he’s like, you just need to get out of here and get a real job. And I was like, [name], I can’t. I have to take nine more classes and do comps and write a dissertation. Like, I can’t leave. But what that inadvertently does is then disparage the work that I am doing right now.

Carmen’s advisor, in an attempt to encourage her, made the comment to her that she was ready to get a “real job.” Her understanding of the subtext of this comment was that work that graduate students do is not viewed as “real.” Graduate students are learners in a learning environment, but the work that they do for their classes or their assistantships is real. This is especially true if the work they are doing as graduate students is informed by years of professional expertise. For example, the teaching that teaching assistants do in the classroom is not less valuable than the teaching they will do as teachers, though if it is the first time they have taught, the expectation is that they are still learning how to teach. A teaching assistant who has been a professional teacher for a decade, though they are always learning more about how to teach, is already capable of a professional level of teaching and is enacting their role as a teacher with all of that expertise already in play.

To continue to explore Carmen’s situation, she was hired to do a small project for her department based on work she had been doing before graduate school. Because the work she was doing was not work she was learning to do, she decided to negotiate being paid at her contract rate for this work:

Carmen: So, my department... has said wow you have a lot of great skills, we want to hire you to do these things. And I was like great, you can hire me at my consulting rate. This is a position. This is a thing that I offer to my clients, like it's a skill that I already have. It's not a skill that I'm trying to learn. So, this is not a student activity. This is a professional performance activity.

Carmen makes the point that if this is expertise she already has, it is fair for her to be compensated at the market rate even though she is positioned as a graduate student. She had to argue her case to her supervisor, who had to figure out how to classify her within the human resources system, and eventually she was able to be paid her consulting rate for this project. Carmen's example demonstrates the tension between her expectations for how her work should be viewed and compensated and her department's default view, which was that graduate students should be paid as graduate students no matter what work they are performing.

Anne, planning to obtain a faculty position after finishing her program, reflected on the transition of how her work would be viewed once she was in a faculty position:

Anne: There's something to be said about how we're grilled through our graduate experience [in a way] that makes us want to earn this PhD. I don't know, we've gone through this however many years of hazing and it's like, now I have this degree. I'm a fucking bad ass. I survived that horrible experience, right? Because our labor is not valued as graduate students then but all of a sudden, we're a professor and like, oh, good, you're now valuable?

Anne, who had recently entered into doctoral candidacy, had felt a shift in how she was perceived and treated by the faculty in her program. She felt that early in her program, she was treated in a way that felt patronizing to her but that as she progressed successfully, she was treated with more respect. She noted, "We get through our exams and we get, we get a raise in travel funding and we sort of get professionalized. We get introduced at conferences in a different way." As the quote above illustrates, she identifies this difference in treatment with a higher level of value for her work now that she is at a more advanced stage in her program. This difference communicates to her that the work she accomplished before this stage in her program

has less value. Though one certainly expects the quality of their work to improve over time, she has felt a level of disrespect for some of her work as a graduate student.

In summary, many returning professionals experienced a notable difference in the standards of how work is done in academia as compared to the industry in which they worked before graduate school. They perceived the standards for efficiency and productivity to be higher in their previous jobs than in the academic context in terms of meeting deadlines, responding to communications in a timely manner, and producing high quality products. Some participants also noted a stark difference in the type of output that is expected in each context and they sometimes struggled with the transition to valuing academic outputs such as theoretical publications as ends in themselves. This difference in end goals felt frustrating to some participants, who felt like their “real world” experiences and expertise were not valued as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Research Question 3

How did returning professionals’ professional identity impact their experience of the socialization process of doctoral education?

As described in the literature review, socialization in graduate school has two goals. The first is helping people learn how to be successful graduate students and the second is to prepare people for careers in their disciplines. Each returning professional in my study had some level of socialization from the previous work experience which informed what they expected of themselves as workers, how to navigate relationships in a professional setting, and what structures and processes they depended on to get their work done. Many of my participants worked in several fields and held several roles, which would impact their sense of socialization. Those who stayed in one field or one type of job for their entire careers, would have experienced more consistent and possibly stronger socialization than those who made multiple moves to other

careers. Ed, for example, spent 40 years in design. He worked at many different places, which all would have had their own unique subcultures, but his socialization to being a software designer would have had some consistency to it, making his professional identity stable and strong. Peter on the other hand, spent a few years working for a plastics manufacturing company and then at a call center and then at an outpatient mental health clinic. His did not experience the same discipline-specific socialization because his jobs were in three very different disciplines with different cultural norms. His professional identity was not tied to one particular field and his socialization was not as strong. The previous socialization of each participant created distinct reactions to the socialization of their graduate programs, though their responses fell into two broad categories. This next section describes the two different patterns of responses that participants had to the socialization of graduate school.

Contrasting Socialization Expectations

I do see myself very much as a professional now, or always, but different ways. I feel like the Ph.D. has professionalized me in ways that I didn't know was going to happen but I anticipated happening in some way. But looking back now that I'm done, I'm like, oh, you all did this thing to me. This happened... I do think there are certain things that academia does very differently than professionals in other capacities. Even when I was working in a medical office, when I was an office manager, that was a kind of different form of professionalization... I was just at a conference a couple of weeks ago and I see myself dressing a certain way, just my own way of being an academic and presenting now, being able to speak [like an academic]. I feel like I've always been a professional. But now I've figured out how to be an academic professional.

Anne, whom we have met several times already in the sections above, had worked professionally for about 13 years, and the role that she talked about the most was her job as an clerk in the emergency room in a rural hospital. She noted several things in the quote above that she had to learn in order to feel like an “academic professional,” such as the way she dressed and how she spoke during presentations. She felt like a professional in her previous work setting, but the things that marked her as a professional were very different and it has been a

learning curve for her to figure out the things that would make her identifiable as a professional in this new setting. In the interview, she mentioned putting a “vision board” together to help her pick out clothes that would help her look like a professional academic. As one who is planning to obtain a tenure track faculty job in the future, it makes sense that she would be so intentional in learning the norms of behavior and presentation in the context in which she hopes to work. She recognized that she was being socialized to become an academic and though this new socialization was a contrast to what she had experienced in her previous experience, she was able to participate in it and allow it to shape her to become a professional academic.

Many participants similarly to Anne, experienced a contrast in the expectations of the socialization in an academic context and in the industries in which they used to work. In the academic setting, they were being shaped to think, talk, dress and work like academics. Some of those standards are not explicitly taught to graduate students but are learned as they spend more time in the context. These differences were often manageable but did at times challenge participants’ professional identities. To operate with a different standard of efficiency could feel like working against a personal standard that was deeply ingrained. Overall, participants noted these differences and then had to make choices about how to participate with the new expectations given to them directly and indirectly in their programs.

For those who experienced contrasting socializations, these new expectations were viewed as expected adjustments to a new environment. Michael was sharply aware of being in a new environment that operated in different ways and, when it was frustrating, reminded himself that he was learning a new culture.

Michael: I was trying to make sense of this, where do those two worlds meet - where I used to work and where I work now? I want to work in a higher education institution for a lot of different reasons. I think they're really interesting organizations that do a lot of good and have a lot of potential. But every once in a while... I'll see something happen,

and I'll be like, I never would have gotten away with that when I worked in engineering. I would have been fired like that. Again, that's not good, but that's something I think that I've been dealing with since I started the program. I was like, well this is a new environment, and a new organization, and a new kind of professional culture that I have to learn to understand.

Michael recognizes a drastic difference in the way work is done in the academic setting. He sees that some of the norms for behavior in the academic setting would have been rejected in his previous setting. One specific way Michael mentions feeling unsure of new norms is when he needed to communicate with faculty:

Michael: My way of operating or the way I understood it doesn't always work in this environment. So then I'm left with like, well how do I do this? There's the uncertainty... So am I interacting with these people wrong or are my e-mails worded incorrectly and should I have done this in different ways, should I have gone and talked to them in person, should I call them on the phone? I'm uncomfortable calling them on the phone... So the way that I understood how work should happen, or interactions at work "should" happen, they weren't working here. Those heuristics that I had learned in my professional life didn't apply sometimes.

In Michael's previous career, he had learned the standards in his context for the means and modes of communication with his colleagues. In some industries, the norms for communication are clear and consistent. There are often standards that people are held accountable to, such as responding to all emails within 24 hours. The tone of correspondences also may have a norm, for example, there might be a standard of how formally people begin and end emails. Michael, in his fourth year in his program, still feels unsure about the new norms of academia. It may have been more difficult for him to learn them as there is less consistency from professor to professor. It may also have been more difficult because it required him to unlearn his old norms before learning new ones.

Several participants expressed frustration with their perception of the different expectations between academia and industry, saying variations of "I would never have gotten

away with that in my old job.” Thomas noted that the relaxed standards felt like a “maturity dip”:

Thomas: I think you almost take a maturity dip going back into this environment because they're a little more relaxed, you know, deadlines can be pushed back or you know poor work can be acceptable in classes sometimes, whereas in the real world you just can't do that.

Thomas was very cognizant that this new environment had more relaxed expectations than in his previous professional settings. To him, it felt like taking a step backwards, in the sense that he had been in this world with relaxed standards before he worked professionally and now he is back in it again. He knows it is temporary and seems fairly ambivalent about the impact these relaxed standards have on his own experience.

Some participants felt tension due to a lack of “stepping stones” or clear metrics for progress in their programs. For those who had become used to clearer guidelines to track their progress in previous careers, this lack of stepping stones was especially frustrating. Alan talked about his desire for annual reports between students and the college to make sure there are enough benchmarks to ensure students are making sufficient progress:

Alan: The college itself should be the one who schedules... [when] you do your dissertation proposal and stuff like that, because all of these departments that I work with do it differently, and ours is probably the most lackadaisical of anyone. I mean, people can go years without doing an annual report and only meet with their committee members for their [qualifying exams] and then for their defense. To be honest, there's not enough checking in and I think as much as we are expected to be independent and we set our own schedules and stuff like that, we need some more benchmarks.

Alan, as noted above, had struggled significantly with what he experienced as a relative lack of clarity in academia as compared to his time in his industry. He had noticed a difference in how different departments handle tracking doctoral students' process and feels that his department has the least amount of structure compared to the other programs he's observed. Given his background, where he had regular reviews by his supervisor, he finds this lack of oversight

distressing. He feels that more structure for tracking progress would be of great benefit to keep people moving forward toward graduation.

Ryan struggled with the relative lack of feedback from supervisors about her work:

Ryan: I think I still approach things as a professional where I'm like, here is a to-do list. My advisor will give me something to do and then I'll do it and then there won't be any follow up and it drives me mad. I'm just used to a boss giving me a task, me completing it, and then my boss being like okay this task was completed properly, let's move onto the next task.

Ryan felt frustrated when she completed a task that her supervisor had given her and then was not given any feedback afterwards. Her expectations for the rhythm of a task being assigned, completed and then debriefed were not what she has experienced with her advisor. Ryan developed these expectations over seven years of professional work across a number of different fields, and she has found it disorienting to have such little follow up on the work she has done.

Conflicting Socialization Expectations

Yeah, this one made me really sad, number 11. The spider eating the fly. We're part of an ecosystem, right? And I agree with that. I agree that we are functioning as part of this big machine... we keep being told that you're doing it for the bigger picture. You're doing it for the justice, the big "J". But it feels like I'm the fly.

And it feels like the spider is probably sick and so feeding the spider is not going to cure the spider's cancer... The spider is already dying. It's already run its course, but I'm still put in the fly position where I'm not getting nutrients and I'm not providing any nutrients because I'm not what the spider needs... It feels like a meaningless sacrifice.

Figure 5.1: Sucre's Picture



In the photoelicitation exercise, Sucre was asked to pick out pictures that described how she felt about her current experience in her program. She picked out several pictures, and one of them was a picture of a spider in a web eating a fly that had gotten stuck in the spider's web (Figure 5.1). She explained that higher education feels like a sick spider, a spider that needs help but is not getting it. She views herself as the fly, and thinks of herself as being consumed by higher education, which will be a meaningless sacrifice because what the spider needs is not just to be fed but to be healed of its sickness. Sucre, a writer, teacher and educational activist, paints a very vivid picture of being part of a system that she sees as broken. Her previous professional experiences as a teacher gave her first hand knowledge of being part of the educational system, and it was through those experiences that she developed her ideas of what is wrong with formal education in the United States. It was also there that she developed a vision for being part of the solution. Her previous socialization involved more than learning the norms of the discipline; for Sucre, it involved learning to critique those norms. Sucre wants to start her own school and

hopes to infuse it with values of shared leadership and sustainable practices. To do that, she has chosen to obtain a PhD, which necessitates that she become immersed in a system she is trying to change. It has been a costly choice for her, and she feels deeply discouraged at times.

In the section above, we looked at participants who experienced a contrast in how they were socialized in their work settings and the socialization of graduate school. For others, like Sucre's analogy demonstrates, they felt like they were being forced into expectations that did not fit them and it felt like a threat to their sense of identity. They experienced the expectations and norms of graduate school as a conflict with their previous professional expectations. Ryan, the social worker who had spent years implementing programs about child abuse prevention, was painfully aware that her background was different than those in her cohort, most of whom seemed to have more research experience than she did. This disparity led her to feel insecure and to cling to her identity as a professional until she became more comfortable:

Ryan: When I first started this program, I had such a bad case of imposter syndrome where I was like oh no, this is so academic and I don't have this rigorous academic background and I made a mistake. I don't have this strong research background and I'm not good at reading that kind of research. And so, I almost clung to [my identity as a professional] in a way. Almost like, well at least I have this other background that a lot of my other work does center around. I definitely now do feel more like an academic now.

The phrase "imposter syndrome" is used in graduate education to describes when a student feels that they are not as smart or hard working or deserving as other students, and can manifest itself in a fear that others will find out that they are just pretending they belong. Ryan felt like her background, strong in community engagement and practical service, was not as suitable for her program and her colleagues at times reinforced this belief by making comments about prospective students without much research experience. Ryan, until she became more confident in her role as a doctoral student, coped with this insecurity by reminding herself that her previous work was important to her and to those she worked for.

Feeling even more of a conflict with graduate socialization, Rosanna felt actively stripped of her previous identity and affiliations in order to accept a new and uniform identity and affiliation:

Rosanna: I had worked long enough in my field that I could go places. You know, community work is very much about word of mouth and building credibility. I'd built enough credibility that I could do some things. But when you come into a space like this, it's almost like, I've never been in the military but the way I understand the induction, not the induction process, the...

Meg: Initiation?

Rosanna: Yes. The initiation process means that you're stripped of a lot of your identity and you become very much the same as everyone else. I see the university space being that way, particularly for people who are professionals.

Rosanna had worked diligently on behalf of marginalized populations and had earned a strong reputation. She had built credibility over years of consistent and passionate work. In graduate school, she experienced socialization as a force trying to strip her of an identity that was very central to who she is as a person. Rosanna's work as a community activist was more than a professional identity. It encompassed her personal values and sense of purpose, and was also informed by her own experiences as part of a marginalized group of people. To be part of an "initiation process" that felt aimed at making her like everyone else felt to her like a violent act against her.

Another participant who is a woman of color, Sucre, observed that the way professionalism looks in the academy does not fit her, and this perceived lack of fit made her feel more vulnerable in her role as a graduate student:

Sucre: Who gets to be professional? Is it this woman with short hair? Is it the queer trans black girl, black person? ...some of these ideas are very intimate. I mean, I'm writing about my own culture. I'm writing about my own family. It's very intimate. But then you feel exposed... I'm going to say it's racial too, right? That people of color have to dress up even more, right? You have to work twice as hard to fit in.

Sucre, as one with many critiques of the education system in this country, sheds light on the way that socialization may be experienced by those who do not represent the dominant culture in America. Socialization is experienced by some students as an attempt to make them like “everyone else,” as Rosanna said, and in Sucre’s experience, there are gendered and racialized elements to what “everyone” should be like.

Nine of twelve participants intended to return to the industry in which they came or saw the PhD as a necessary or helpful way to launch a career in a new field and did not intend to pursue faculty positions. Several of the participants not pursuing a career in academia made reference to feeling isolated and even written off by faculty because they were not pursuing a faculty career. They perceived preferential treatment for students who were on the faculty track.

Peter felt that his choice to pursue a nonacademic career caused a rift between him and his first advisor, and that he did not get much support from his program in general:

Peter: Part of why we fell out was my transition to nonacademic perspectives and stuff like that. There was a lot of other behavioral stuff with him but anyway, he was not very supportive and there was not a lot of explicit support for my career decision. Not to say that people actively discouraged it. Absolutely not. There was no one who was like, “don’t do this” but I was kind of getting excited about it and I didn’t get a ton of support. Now that’s something that they’re actively trying to change, especially in my particular program area. Because I think they’re starting to realize that there’s just not enough jobs out there and people are by necessity going to have to go into industry and so they need to start supporting that.

Peter reports that though no one discouraged him from pursuing a job outside of the academy, there was not much support for him. In another section of the interview, he says that he was able to make connections to people in industry jobs on his own and was able to obtain a job that started in between our first and second interviews. He also acknowledged that his program realized that there are not enough faculty jobs for everyone that is graduating, and that they are actively trying to do a better job preparing people for other job markets.

Ryan spoke of a growing sense of risk as she navigated a program that did not seem to validate or know how to support her career aspirations, which is not something she expected when she entered the program.

Ryan: I don't want to go into academia, I want to have a job at a government wage and at an international organization. And now I'm kind of like oh man, I feel everybody is going into this academic track where that's what they want to do. I still don't want to be in academia, but I'm starting to get a little bit worried that there's not a lot of people like me that really don't want to go into academia in my program.

For someone like Ryan, who as discussed above, already felt like an outsider in her program, she also felt an additional sense of not belonging as her career trajectory was different than most of her peers. She was still in the stage of her program where her focus was on finishing her classwork, but her worries about how she would be prepared for the job market were increasing steadily.

Anne, who is planning on pursuing a faculty position, perceived that her program was intentionally training her to be in academia, and she also felt that they expected her to go on to a research institution:

Anne: The assumption is that we will go on to be a professor, so any one of us who decides to do [something] different, they don't know how to handle that. They don't know how to professionalize. They're like good luck?... It doesn't necessarily matter where but the assumption is, you know, an R1, R2, maybe an R3. Like community college, it's not really a thing that they would be excited about. And any kind of industry? It's like, they'll be understanding. Okay, you want the money. But we aren't being trained for that. We're trained to be professors. Absolutely. Stay in academia and do the thing that we're doing.

Even though the socialization of her program matches her career goals, Anne has perceived the dynamic that her program is most geared toward preparing future faculty. The expectations of her program included the assumption, not only that she would pursue a career in academia, but that she would pursue a faculty position at a large research institution.

To summarize the findings for the third and final research question, there were two main patterns for how participants experienced the socialization pressures of their graduate programs. The first was an experience of contrast, where they recognized that the expectations of their program were new and different than what they had become accustomed to in their previous settings. They were able to navigate and adjust to these new expectations fairly easily. The second was an experience of conflict, where participants felt like these new expectations did not fit them for various reasons. Some made adjustments to find new advisors and others had to make decisions to participate with these new expectations in a way that was least compromising to their sense of self.

Participant Recommendations

In the spirit of my findings, which is that returning participants have a wealth of experiences and expertise that are sometimes not visible to others in the academic setting, it was important to me to include their recommendations as part of my data. In the first interview, I asked participants what advice they would give to other returning professionals. I also asked them what recommendations they had for their programs to better support returning professionals. Participants also often offered suggestions for advisors and faculty throughout the interviews. This final section of the findings chapter is the summary of their recommendations.

Advice for Returning Professionals

When asked what advice they would give to other returning professionals about starting PhD programs, participants had many things to say. The advice was as diverse and nuanced as the participants themselves, as these excerpts below will demonstrate. The first section below summarizes the advice that focused on how returning professionals view themselves. The second section focuses on the importance of retaining and utilizing a “professional mentality”

and bringing that mentality to bear in the academic setting. The third section highlights advice that counts the cost of graduate school, in terms of ensuring that the field is a good fit, bearing the emotional weight of an identity shift and ensuring that the financial risks have been considered.

View experiences as valuable. Several participants advised other returning professionals to choose to view their previous experience as a valuable asset for navigating graduate school. Thomas recommended that returning professionals regard their maturity and life experiences as valuable advantages, and encouraged them to be patient with younger students who, as he acknowledged in an earlier section, may have different expectations for work ethic or time management. In addition, Thomas recommended staying connected to old networks and sources of support, especially for those who like him, uprooted their lives for graduate school.

Thomas: Use your maturity to your advantage, use your life experiences to your advantage... realize that younger people are trying their best, don't be cynical or condescending... Be inclusive and positive. Make sure you're accomplishing your academic goals... make sure you get the most out of it. And have good support from your past life. Maintain those relationships if you move, like I moved 1000 miles to be here.

Anne, like Thomas, also encouraged returning professionals to give themselves a lot of credit and to see their previous experiences as positive and relevant.

Anne: Give yourself a lot of credit and space and just let yourself sort of figure things out. And trust. Trust that your knowledge that you're bringing with you is actually relevant in certain ways and will be helpful in ways that your peers who just went straight through college aren't going to have... a lot of my peers, they didn't have those life experiences... I've never seen my life experience as a negative. It's never been a thing that I was like, oh, I wish I would've done this sooner. I've never felt that. My brother's going back to school and he's like oh, I haven't in so many years and I'm like, you don't get it. It's so much better that way. I mean, I can't speak to what it's like to go all the way through but I'm glad. I'm glad I've done these other things.

Anne could see many ways the knowledge she came in with was valuable, and that her experience in her program was better for having had that knowledge. She relied on the knowledge and perspective that had developed over her 13 years of professional experience, and it made navigating her PhD easier for her.

Michael's main point of advice was, when considering a PhD, reflect honestly about their motivations and to be willing to "check their ego at the door."

Michael: Make sure that your motivations are the right type of motivations. I think if you're going into a PhD program because you think it will get you respect or you think it will get you some sort of validation that you think you need, that's not a reason to go into it... so, if you think you're doing that, maybe think again. And I think, check yourself to a degree. I've given myself a lot of unnecessary stress and anger by being like, why won't they listen to me, don't they know that I know about this and they have my resume... So yeah, kind of check your ego at the door.

As one who had fought the urge to feel slighted at times by his treatment in his program, Michael wanted to encourage returning professionals to let go of their desire to have their past experience understood and valued and to be at peace with knowing their own worth. He believes that respect is something that does not come from titles or degrees or others' approval but from within, a self-determined evaluation of himself and his experiences as valuable.

Retain and use professional mentality. In addition to choosing a positive view of their previous experience as valuable, several participants also had an interesting take on how to make use of these previous experiences. They had chosen to retain their professional mentality, thinking of school as merely a different kind of professional experience. They saw keeping this professional mentality as a contrast to returning to a previously held school mentality. Peter, for example, chose to view graduate school as professional development, not as "school part two." For him, this meant treating his academic work the same way he approached work in his professional life, and he worked hard to keep his perspective as consistent as possible. He

wanted to use the same standard of professionalism in his school work that he did in previous jobs even if that differed from the way that others around him approached their work. He encouraged returning professionals to use this mentality themselves.

Peter: Keep that professionalism... It's not school part two. Don't treat it like that because I think it's for the better that you treat it like work and career development... I feel like that served me really well and I don't know if that's the best thing necessarily but, from my perspective, I really appreciated having those professional experiences coming in because I think it changed my work ethic, changed my perspective on how do I organize these activities with my life.

Carmen also focused on maintaining her sense of personal professionalism while in the role of a graduate student. She exhorted other returning professionals not to forget they are professionals but beyond that, she encouraged them to advocate for whatever support they need in light of their professional identity.

Carmen: I would say never forget that you're a professional. Always remember that you have valuable skills and knowledge that is worthy of respect regardless of your position as a student. And so, whatever respect means to you in any particular situation, you need to ask for that and push for that. So yeah, I would say that's the main thing. I guess beyond that, the other advice I often give is be very clear about therefore what support you do need from outside, from your advisor, from the university, from your program, and make sure that you pick a place that gives you those supports. For me, my advisor's personal character was the most important thing.

Carmen, here and in other places in her interview, is a consistent voice of advocacy for returning professionals to know their value and to position themselves to have their valued recognized by faculty and peers alike. She shared that her decision to attend her program was based on her belief that her advisor would be supportive of her, a decision informed by her negative experience with her advisor in her masters program.

Like Carmen, Alan's advice was for returning professionals to remember that they are interviewing the program as much as the program is interviewing them. He encouraged them to approach their graduate program the way they would approach a prospective employer,

clarifying what they can expect of their advisor and of the program the same way they might clarify a job description. He, like Peter, has chosen to try to retain the structures of his professional life and to try to apply them in this new setting. In his past job, he had clear structures and expectations for his relationship with his supervisor. Higher education is more amorphous in those terms, so he has tried to build those structures for himself, with varying degrees of success. His advice to returning professional is to follow his example and approach graduate school like a contract negotiation.

Alan: You're being interviewed for whatever program you're going into. Make sure you interview them back... If you are coming from a professional atmosphere it's like, alright, what can I do? What are the steps that I need to make? And you ask for that... You're going into something that is so amorphous and you will move across country and you will never have met these individuals before. Now you do that with professional jobs too. But then again, you've got your contract. Here is what you are supposed to do... Try to see if you can figure out what your contract is before you go. Make sure you have actually cleared that up if you have already come from that atmosphere... I know what you expect from me, but I need to know what I can expect from you.

Consider the cost. Several participants' advice held the idea of counting the cost of a PhD program, whether that cost be changing their career paths, the emotional cost of making an identity shift, or the actual financial cost of obtaining a PhD. Ryan's advice was to spend time "dabbling" in the field before committing to a PhD. She was someone making a career shift at the doctoral level, and she has wondered at times if the change was the best idea.

Ryan: Make sure you put in the time to dabble in the field before you start, and make sure it's something that you're interested in. Because I think a thing that could happen to people, and it could still happen to me, [is that you discover that] this is something that is more of a hobby and not something that you want to change your whole life for.

Ryan brought up the important concept that some things are better left as hobbies or passion projects and some things are better as professional careers. She encouraged returning professionals to explore their future fields before making a big change.

Also making a career shift at the doctoral level, Rosanna also encouraged returning professionals to thoroughly explore their options before entering a program. She also acknowledged the importance of knowing that there can be a big difference in what something feels like as a side project and what it feels like as a full time career:

Rosanna: If you're considering a career in an area that you are not already in, you really need to vet and talk to folks, I mean, just until you're exhausted about the experience. I have taught for years at the higher ed level and so my experience was as an adjunct. So for me, all the good stuff was there. I didn't need it for the money. I just enjoyed it and interpreted my experience as being complete, but it wasn't. Teaching full time at a university is vastly different.

Sue shared that she wished she had been better prepared for the emotional shift that happened for her as a returning professional.

Sue: People prepared me for things like, you know you're going to be reading a lot and you know it might be tougher than you think. But I don't think a lot of people prepared me for the identity or more of the emotional kind of switch. I think that part would be something that I would want to give to somebody else. Just to say, be prepared to suddenly find yourself feeling anxious when you think you shouldn't be or feeling inflexible when everybody around you seems so flexible...

Sue went on to share a story of feeling out of place during orientation when asked about places she had traveled recently. As the mother of two middle school aged children working full time as a social worker, she had not traveled anywhere recently, and listening to the travel stories of those who were in a very different stage of life made her feel insecure and that she would not fit in. Thankfully, she had an advisor who she could share these feelings with, and found support from her husband as well. Her advice to returning professionals was to be ready for this shift in identities that can come with a surprising amount of feelings.

Sue: In the beginning when we did introductions, the question that we were asked to introduce ourselves was something like, what's the most exotic place you've traveled most recently. And I'm thinking, I've got two kids in middle school. I haven't gone anywhere. And people were like, I spent my summer in Thailand and [I go to] Africa twice a year and I'm like, oh my gosh, what am I doing here... I remember calling [my husband] on my way to the hotel saying, I don't know what I'm doing here. I was a

wreck. I was an absolute wreck. My meeting with who now is my primary advisor was the next morning and he was the first to call it for me. He was like, I'm not surprised. He said I probably should have done a better job by telling you this is probably how you would feel. Because I just kept saying I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm normally a very fairly confident person.

Another important lens through which to view Sue's experience of this shift in identities was her background as a first-generation college student, meaning that she was the first in her immediate family to attend college. Being the first in her family to attend college, she remembers feeling unfamiliar with how to navigate the college environment, which also led to worries that she did not belong in college in the first place. She reflected that her discomfort during the PhD orientation process was compounded by old feelings of not belonging that started when she began at her undergraduate institution. She reflected in the interview that she has become aware of how that early feeling stayed with her in ways she only recently recognized.

Two participants shared advice about considering the financial risk of returning to school. Rosanna warned returning professionals do ensure that would recoup the money that they would lose in graduate school, meaning what she referred to earlier as the loss of "money making years." Even with the funding she had obtained, she was not making the same kind of money during her five years in the program that she would have made in five years of work at her previous salary level.

Rosanna: I would also say to make sure that you're going to recoup the money that you lose on your time here, the resources lost, the investments you have to make. That's critical. And largely? For people who are just curious, don't do it. Unless you're going into law or business, I don't encourage people to do it. Yeah, because it's stressful. I'm stressed out and it's unnecessarily stressful.

When Ed began graduate school, he was married and both he and his wife were making over six figures. Over the course of that year, his circumstances changed and he found himself relying only a graduate assistantship stipend. Thankfully, his kids were already financially

independent and his mortgage was paid off, but he could easily have been in a very precarious financial situation. He warns other returning professionals to think carefully about their financial situation and to be prepared if it has to change.

Ed: Think carefully. Really think... about some of the financial aspects of it, especially if they were of the age that I was. Initially, the financial aspect was nothing because [my wife and I had] two six-figure incomes. But then due to a series of life events, that changed drastically for me and I ended up living on a grad assistantship... Luckily, I ended up not having a home mortgage but think about that.

Participants shared many thoughts when asked about advice they would give to other returning professionals. They encouraged returning professionals to make informed choices about if a PhD was right for them, and to approach the application and onboarding process by using a mentality informed by a professionalized perspective. They also advised them to value their backgrounds and experience and to advocate for themselves as needed, using their professional mentality to navigate in this new academic context. In this next section, I will explore the recommendations participants made for their advisors and their programs that would help them better support other returning professionals.

Recommendations for Advisors and Programs

In the interviews, I asked participants directly what their programs could have done differently to support them as returning professionals. Participants also often shared recommendations throughout the interviews. Several participants felt that their programs had supported them more than enough and did not have any recommendations. The first section covers recommendations that would have been most helpful as early interventions, such as having better program orientations. The second section describes better ways to prepare students for careers outside of academia. And the third section consists of recommendations for specific

ways that programs and advisors could offer returning professionals additional support and validation.

Early interventions. Several participants recommended that their programs create more comprehensive orientations for doctoral students. Carmen, whose funding comes from one program but whose advisor is in another program, attended two orientations, which she describes below.

Carmen: The orientation that my program does for graduate students is only two and a half hours long. The orientation that [a different program] does for their graduate students, which I also had to attend, is two days long. I think the happy medium is somewhere in between those two numbers, but two and a half hours is way too short... If they could even spend six hours or even four hours, it would help students really understand the contract from the beginning of what do you actually have to do... That very small investment at the beginning would do a huge amount to help empower students to know where they stand and where the department stands... I almost wish that an advanced graduate student would run orientation, not the graduate coordinator people.

Having had two orientation experiences, one that was two and a half hours and one that was two days, she recommended somewhere in between in length. She would have benefitted from more concrete details about program expectations in terms of the requirements for graduation, which she had mentioned in an earlier section. By giving doctoral students more information on the front end, she argued that she would have been better equipped to move through her program in a way that fit her specifications, taking her past experience and her future trajectory into account. She also recommended that an advanced graduate student would run the orientation instead of the support staff, as she believes one who has navigated the program as a student might be better suited to explain the process to fellow graduate students.

Alan also referenced the orientation process, and he specifically mentioned wanting more information about resources for graduate students such as where to go for help with mental health. In his opinion, letting people know what the resources are and how to access them early

in the process would serve a preventative function, allowing people to get help before things reach a crisis point. He also believes that taking openly about these resources might help destigmatize help seeking behavior.

Alan: Maybe a bit more on orientation. Tell them about where to go to therapy and stuff like that. Give them a list so there's no guilt behind it... This is so you're not three years in and going insane thinking you are a complete failure. You need a bit more support just for overall PhDs... I'm like well you know what, it's time to say hey, here's all the resources. Here's what's expected of you. Here's where you can get some help.

Sue's recommendation was that it would have been helpful as an early intervention to have an older returning professional paired with her as a kind of mentor.

Sue: It took me a while to find out that I wasn't the only one and I really wish there had been some kind of a pairing, something to say like hey, so-and-so is in their fourth year and they've had these experiences and worked before coming back. So, not [something that makes] an assumption about what you need, but more of an opportunity to work a little more closely with somebody that you might have some things in common with... You expect a lot of diversity in your group and that definitely is here, but when you don't feel comfortable with that in the beginning you don't see it. You just don't see it.

She argued that talking to someone in a similar position would have helped her feel less out of place and more like she also belonged. It took her a while to realize that there were others like her in her program, and meeting them early and having intentional interactions with them around their experiences of being returning professionals would have been a valuable source of support for her.

Support industry career preparation. Several participants highlighted the important role of early interventions and having intentional orientations that supported returning professionals as they transitioned in to their programs. Others focused more on interventions that would help them transition out of their programs, specifically for those who were headed for jobs outside of academia. Peter, who had been able to find a full-time job working for a for-profit organization, pointed to the role his advisor had in helping support his future career goals.

He and his first advisor had a falling out, which was in part due to his advisor not being supportive of Peter changing direction to pursue an industry career:

Peter: Part of why [my first advisor and I] fell out was my transition to nonacademic perspectives... he was not very supportive and there was not a lot of explicit support for my career decision... My new advisor, he was very supportive. He's like, I understand what you're trying to do and where you're trying to go and why you're doing it and I totally support it. You know, if you want to talk to people that I know, we can get you some connections and stuff like that. So it was great.

Once he found a new advisor, Peter felt much more supported, to the point that his advisor had offered to provide connections for Peter in the industry he wanted to work. Peter also mentioned that his program had shifted over the course of his four years and he had seen his program start to offer and advertise more workshops for students interested in jobs outside of academia.

Steve's recommendations were to allow students access to an email list of alumni, which would help connect current students with those alumni for networking purposes. In Steve's experience, his university had not allowed current students access to alumni, reserving contact with them for fundraising purposes.

Steve: Email list of alumni. [My program] refused to give that to us because [the university] refused to give it to us. The alumni foundation said they're only allowed to contact alumni certain times, many times a year for money. You can't contact them outside of that, even if it's not for money because they want to control the conversation. I kid you not... That's what I want to build, a Google drive for alumni so you can have connections, where they went, inside email, outside email...

Along similar lines as Steve, Ryan had several suggestions that would connect current students to alumni working outside of academia. Ryan recommended having a job fair put on by her program that focuses on doctoral students. She argued that since many of the faculty have only had work experience within academia, it would be a benefit to intentionally connect current students with those who have gone before them and have landed careers outside of academia.

Ryan: I think sometimes [my program] does a job fair, but I feel it's more geared toward undergrads... I mean the problem is, my advisor is in academia and that's what she's

always been in. So, that's what she knows. And all the other professors here, also... It would be cool if there was a liaison in each department that could be that conduit to a post-graduate professional career... So being able to connect with where have the alumni gone and would some of them be interested in coming back and doing a panel and saying this is what it was like.

She also mentioned the possibility of having a liaison within each department that kept up with alumni and could invite them back for a panel with current students. Later in the interview, Ryan also floated the idea of offering opportunities for internships:

Ryan: When I was getting my master's, because it was a professional degree, we had to do an internship and obviously the internship is one those ways where you can forge connections and get jobs. And obviously that's not a part of this program, which makes sense because it's academic... I think other programs, I think engineering is an example of a program that does a really good job of preparing people for a professional job.

Ryan's master's degree was practical in nature and she recognizes that a PhD is academic and research focused. But her previous experience of having an internship for her master's program has given her a clear example of an opportunity that now would also be helpful for her. She has seen that internships are often the best way to obtain a job within a particular company or field. She also has the idea that other programs at the doctoral level do have different opportunities to prepare doctoral students for careers outside of academia.

Create vehicles for support and validation. Some participants offered recommendations for how programs could offer support and validation specifically to returning professionals. Rosanna and Sucre's recommendations were tied to their identity as women of color in their roles as teaching assistants, both having had many years of teaching experiences behind them. They both reflected on their experiences as women of color who were in teaching assistantships who did not feel supported by their programs in that role. Both of these participants had received negative evaluations by students and instead of their supervisors checking with them about what had happened, they received sanctions or in Sucre's experience,

the threat of their funding not being renewed. Rosanna makes the point below that the research has indicated that female instructors of color often are given poor evaluations by students due to issues of racial and gender bias. And despite being in an educational program that discusses this research, in practice, Rosanna experienced her supervisors choosing to believe the evaluations at face value.

Rosanna: Believe the things that you tell people. So we know that female instructors of color have a very difficult time interacting with students... The student evaluations that they receive are not always reflective of what actually happens in the classroom and we know that. We sit in classes where our professors tell us that, yet, myself and other people have literally been sanctioned because of things that students have said on the evaluations that were blatant lies. Bringing up the whole idea of “the research says” is shut down because it doesn’t apply in the case of you. Everybody else, yes, but not you... More support for students of color, more support for nontraditional students and concrete support.

Rosanna argued for those in authority to listen to their women of color instructors about their negative experiences in the classroom, experiences that the research supports. Sucre’s experience was similar and she also felt that her department should have shielded her and supported her in the face what she believed were overly negative evaluations.

Sucre: My department, instead of shielding me or helping me navigate, I felt punished. I felt told, “we don’t even know if we are going to give you an assistantship next semester.” I mean [the funding was] the whole reason I chose this school, so far away from everything that I like and know.

Instead of support for being unfairly criticized by her students or an exploration of what may have actually happened in the classroom, she felt punished and feared that her funding was in jeopardy. She had already taken a large pay cut to attend her doctoral program and had moved from another state, so a threat to her funding made her feel especially vulnerable.

Carmen’s recommendation was to offer opportunities for returning professionals to share their existing expertise and knowledge with others. She suggested a brownbag series to

showcase those with incoming skills to demonstrate that those with experience are seen and valued.

Carmen: I think they could have sponsored a weekly or biweekly brownbag series that invited graduate students to share a skill that they had coming in. Almost all of our students have had careers before they come in. That would have sent a very strong supportive signal from the department that we value you for what you're bringing here. Not just because it helped you get in the door but because it is going to help us and you *while* you're here.

Carmen made the point that those existing skills are often what makes an applicant attractive to a program and may be a factor in them being accepted into the program. However, it can feel, once they start, that those experiences and skills are no longer relevant. Carmen argues that the university is missing out and could capitalize on those skills by offering opportunities such as the brownbag series she recommended. Carmen also shared some of her insights about how those in academia could view all students from a whole person approach, an approach that would be particularly helpful in recognizing and validating the unique experiences of returning professionals.

Carmen: Student success has finally understood that whole person approach, but they only look at it in the now: look at all aspects of a person's life right now. But providing whole person support over time or support for the past, present, and future, validating all of those things as still a part of who you are in the present is really, really important... And I think that view of past, present, and future selves would help all students... especially when their past self or their experience of their past self has been something that has gone against the dominant culture.

Carmen referenced student success literature and theory, which has proposed that there is a benefit to viewing students as whole persons instead of thinking of them only as students. This view may include other roles that students are holding in the present: they may be parents or full-time employees or siblings and those roles also inform their role as a student. In Carmen's understanding, this shift is a positive one, but is limited in that it tends to see students as whole people in the present. She argues for a longitudinal view of students, one that takes their past

into consideration as well as their future trajectory. She also highlights the idea that those with non-dominant identities would also likely experience the dominant culture within the academy differently. Carmen believes that this longitudinal whole person view would help advisors and programs better understand and support returning professionals in their programs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the answers to my three research questions. In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the implications of these findings and make my own recommendations for how to better support returning professionals. I will also address the limitations of my study and share ideas for future research.

DISCUSSION

Returning professionals, as defined in this study, are PhD students who have worked for at least seven years before beginning their doctoral education. They have an established sense of who they are as professionals, having been socialized to one extent or another during the work they did before coming back to academia. Their professional identity informed how they did their work, how they expected to interact with supervisors and peers, and what kind of work they felt qualified and competent to do. This professional identity came with them to graduate school, though they were no longer operating from it as their primary identity. Having a professional identity made a significant impact on how they experienced the socialization of graduate education and how they performed the role of a graduate student. As seen in the preceding chapters, each of the twelve participants had a unique professional identity and therefore a unique response to the expectations of being a graduate student. However, there were discernible patterns of experience and in this chapter, I will take a deeper look at those patterns and what they mean, both for returning professionals as well as the programs they are in and the faculty who work with them. I will also discuss the limitations of my study and propose directions for future research.

Summary of Study

To be qualified for the present study, participants had to be in at least their third year of their respective doctoral programs and had to be funded by the university through some kind of graduate assistantship. I made this decision for several reasons. After three years, they would have had more time to reflect meaningfully on their transition into graduate school and to experience the mechanisms of graduate socialization. They would have been moving into or already being in the Personal stage, which is characterized by the internalization of new

expectations, a process could include addressing values conflicts and conflicting self-identifications (Nesheim et al, 2006). Moreover, being funded by the university also meant that they would be more immersed in the university setting, which limited their contact with their previous work and made for more of a clear transition from one role to the next. They had to have worked for at least seven years in a full-time capacity before coming back to school and they could no longer be working full time. This length of time in a professional setting allowed more time for a sense of professional identity to develop. I limited participants to domestic students and recruited an even number of men and women, six of each for a total of twelve. I also tried to get a range of disciplines and selected participants from six different colleges at a large public research university in the Midwest.

I found my participants through solicitation emails sent out through formal and informal channels, and conducted two semi-structured interviews with the twelve participants who met the criteria listed above. I then transcribed the interviews doing some myself and also using two professional transcription services. I subsequently coded the interviews by hand and went through several rounds of analyzing the data, refining codes and looking for patterns. I ended up with the following answers to my three research questions, summarized in the table below:

Table 6.1: Summary of Findings

Research Question	Findings
How do returning professionals in doctoral programs experience ongoing <u>shifts</u> in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student as it relates to their professional identity?	The shift felt like entering into a <i>liminal space</i> – sometimes uncomfortable to the point of being a loss of identity and confidence; other times freeing to be able to focus on learning and research.

Table 6.1: (cont'd)

What <u>tensions</u> do returning professionals experience in their role as graduate students that are informed by their existing professional identity?	<i>Student vs. Professional</i>: returning professionals felt a sense of intra-role conflict, where their already existing professional identity complicated how they took on and enacted the role of a doctoral student. <i>Academic vs. Industry</i>: returning professionals noted a difference in the way work was done in their previous jobs and in academia, which felt frustrating at times. They also felt that the rules of their program were not spelled out like a contract as in other jobs, which led to (1) uncertainty about how to access funding and (2) vulnerability to favoritism.
How did returning professionals' professional identity impact their experience of the <u>socialization</u> process of doctoral education?	Some participants experienced <i>contrasting socializations</i> where their previous socialization was different than but not in conflict with academia. Other participants experienced <i>conflicting socializations</i> where their previous socialization was at odds with academic socialization. Some of these participants felt that they were being asked to abandon their previous identity, and that felt very threatening to their overall sense of self.

Exploration of the Liminal Space

In this section, I explore the implications of how being in a liminal space impacted the participants and what factors influenced how they experienced that space in regards to their professional identity. All of my participants felt a shift from leaving their professional lives and entering their graduate programs. They often characterized their time in graduate school as an “in between” time, a liminal space between the work they had been doing and the work they hoped to do in the future. In order to understand what factors influenced how they experienced

the liminal space distinctly as returning professionals, I will begin by discussing how doctoral education can be meaningfully viewed as a liminal space. I will then discuss how my participants viewed themselves as professionals, breaking their professional identity down into two constructs: professionalism, which is *how* participants did their work and related to others, and working content, which is *what* participants did in their careers, the skills and knowledge they developed over time. I will address both of those constructs separately, looking at how participants' professionalism and their working content operated in the liminal space of graduate education. Understanding how these constructs functioned will bring attention to the reasons for the disparate ways returning professionals experienced being graduate students. I will also bring these ideas into conversation with the existing literature on graduate education and career development.

Originating in anthropology, a liminal state takes place in the context of a ritual where a person is passing from one status to another, such as marriage, moving to a new city or starting a new job (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1909). In van Gennep's (1909) original work on rites of passage in small tribal societies, he describes three stages that individuals move through in a change of status. The first stage involves a metaphorical death, or separation from past self and the previous status that one held. The second stage, which is the liminal state, takes the longest as it involves a change in the individual's identity. The third and final stage is an incorporation of the person back into the original community in their new status.

Some researchers have conceptualized doctoral education as a liminal space (Keefer, 2015). Keefer (2015) said that "liminality in this domain refers to the in-between period where one is no longer who previously existed, nor has yet developed into the independent researcher or expert practitioner." (p. 18). Keefer's study discovered that participants most often did not

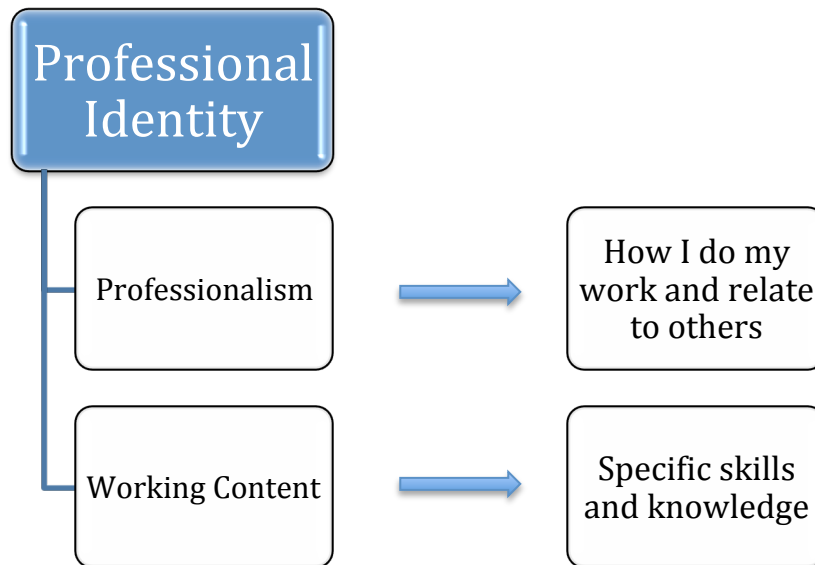
identify being in a liminal state at the time it was happening. Through the research interviews, participants found naming and exploring the liminality of their doctoral program experience to be cathartic (Keefer, 2015).

In the case of doctoral liminality, entering graduate school serves as the separation from the previous state and entry into a space in which an identity transformation is taking place. Occupying the role of a graduate student is the liminal state during which an identity transformation will occur. Graduation serves as the ceremony of re-integration, the end of the liminal state, where people are introduced into the world with a new identity and a new credential. For students who are coming to PhD programs directly from undergraduate or masters programs and who have not taken a significant amount of time away from the academic setting, they will be continuing in the role of a student but will need to adjust to the new and unique expectations of doctoral education. Returning professionals enter this liminal space from a much different vantage point. They are coming in as professionals with an already formed professional identity that they bring with them into this place of transformation. I argue that the meaning they give to their professional identity and the place it occupies in their overall understanding of themselves determines how they experience the liminal space of graduate education.

As I talked to my participants, it became clear their idea of being “professionals” had two distinct constructs. It contained both their sense of *professionalism* (how they do their work and how they relate to others) and the *working content* of their professional identity (what they did, meaning the specific skills and expertise that they developed while working). Ed’s working content, for example, was designing computer systems and networks. Sue’s working content was clinical expertise in working with families in a brief intervention model as well as

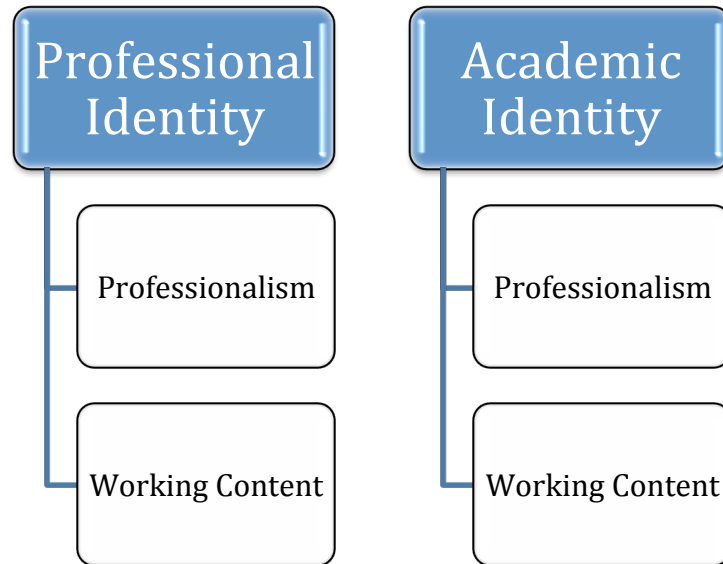
administrative duties to oversee part of the clinic operations. The figure below shows this breakdown of professional identity into these two components.

Figure 6.1: Professional Identity Components



Participants' academic identity, by which I mean their identity as graduate students, also contains a sense of *professionalism*, how they do their work and relate to others in graduate school, and *working content*, which are the skills and expertise they are asked to perform and learn while in graduate school. The working content of their academic identity include things such as completing coursework, taking comprehensive exams, performing tasks for assistantships and conducting independent research. The figure below represents these two identities next to each other. In the following sections, I will explore how the two constructs, professionalism and working content, operated in the liminal space of graduate education. This discussion will shed light on the reasons that some participants seemed more vulnerable to having a negative experience in their programs while others seemed less vulnerable.

Figure 6.2: Professional and Academic Identity Components



Professionalism in the Liminal Space

Returning professionals are intentionally taking on the temporary role of being a full-time doctoral student. Their existing sense of professionalism is still within them, and the expectations for their behaviors and attitudes that guided them in their professional lives are still active. These existing expectations at times create conflicts where returning professionals have to choose which expectations to meet: the ones from their past that they used in professional contexts, or the expectations of being a graduate student that they are learning in the liminal space of their graduate programs. In the language of role theory, I argue that this existing professionalism can create an intra-role conflict, which means, as described in my literature review, that there are conflicting expectations for how someone should enact a particular role (Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981).

Standards of professionalism impacted participants in three main areas. The first area was how people communicated with others and managed their time. According to the findings, some participants experienced an intra-role conflict when their previous standards for

communication or time management were not met in academia. They found themselves unsure of how to operate effectively as graduate students and were not sure how to communicate or manage their schedules in this new context. Other participants found it relatively easy to maintain their personal sense of professionalism in the liminal space, and therefore the situation did not lead to an intra-role conflict. Peter, for example, chose to respond to emails and uphold deadlines the same way he did in his professional settings regardless of the various standards used by faculty or other students in the academic setting.

The second area impacted by differing takes on professionalism was how work was done and what standards should apply to that work. Participants experienced a sense of intra-role conflict when their standards for how work should be done were different in academia. For example, when Steve believed the work he was doing in his university research lab would not have met the safety standards in his industry, he became frustrated. Some also felt like they had to dial down their professionalism in order to work with fellow graduate students who did not have the same standards in terms of work ethic or time management. The expectations for professionalism developed in their previous professional role were different than those in the graduate student role, and they had to determine which set of expectations to follow as a graduate student.

The third area where participants were likely to experience an intra-role conflict around their professionalism was in their relationships with faculty members. Every graduate student has to learn to navigate relationships with their advisors, professors, and supervisors within the graduate education context. Returning professionals, however, have unique factors to consider that complicate those relationships. They may be the same age or older than the faculty with whom they work, which can be a very different dynamic to navigate. Returning professionals

also bring with them expectations for how to operate in a subordinate role and how to relate to those in authority over them; these expectations have been shaped by many years of relating to bosses and supervisors in a different context than that of student-faculty. Those who worked in settings other than higher education described feeling a different power dynamic with bosses in those settings as compared to their relationships with faculty, specifically their advisors. Prior research has demonstrated a supportive relationship with their advisor is one of the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction with their PhD experience (Dericks, Thompson, Roberts, & Phua, 2019).

In addition to providing support while in graduate school, advisors are gatekeepers to future career options. If a student burns a bridge with an advisor, it could potentially limit their career opportunities in the future, as they are an important source of recommendation letters and networking contacts. An advisor can also be in complete control over the timing and pace of a student's academic program, and there are not the same kind of external checks and balances in academia as there are in many other industries. These dynamics made it challenging for returning professionals to know how to manage the role of being a graduate student in terms of their relationships with their advisors. Their sense of professionalism, which guided them in how to interact with those in positions of power in the workplace, was not always able to guide them in knowing how to build and manage their relationship with their advisor, especially when there was conflict within that relationship.

Those who previously worked in higher education, such as Michael and Peter, had developed working relationships with many faculty members in their previous jobs, and they found it somewhat jarring that there was a stark difference in their relationships with faculty members once they had become graduate students. They both remarked that they expected to be

more collegial with faculty than they ended up being, and they believed this was due to faculty seeing them in what felt like a one-dimensional way (e.g. as only graduate students). It is not realistic to expect faculty members to keep everyone's personal background in mind in every interaction, and it is also possible that faculty members were attempting not to show favoritism or be overly collegial with one student over any other student. Regardless, for some returning professionals, they noticed a difference in what they were expecting in their relationship with faculty and had to adjust their expectations accordingly. Jazvec-Martec (2009) noted that doctoral students oscillate between their academic identities (views of themselves as legitimate scholars) and their student identity. His study demonstrated that when faculty interacted with students in a way that confirmed their student identity over their academic identity, it created a sense of identity conflict that could discourage students, making them question their ability to be successful in the academic space. For returning professionals, especially those who had professional experience in higher education, they would be additionally vulnerable when treated only as a student.

Another area where participants noted a frustration with professionalism is the nature of how professionalism looks in academia. Sucre was the main participant to voice these concerns, as she shared her understanding of professionalism in academia to look like acting, dressing and talking like a white male. For her, enacting the role of a graduate student meant having to navigate the racialized and gendered expectations of those that she sees playing that role most successfully. During the photoelicitation exercise, she pointed to a photo of several people in different kinds of outfits standing against a brick wall. She pointed to all of them and asked, "Who gets to be professional?" She made the point that "people of color have to dress up even more" than their white counterparts. This notion that socialization, the process that teaches

graduate students what professionalism looks like in the academy, is racialized and gendered has been affirmed by recent studies (Sallee, 2011; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). Winkle-Wagner and McCoy (2016) found that graduate students of color felt like they were being asked to leave their culture behind, that part of the role of the liminal space was to strip them of their cultural identity. These dynamics have a significant impact on returning professionals of color who come in with a developed sense of professional identity. For them to continue to be seen as a professional in this new context, it may feel like they are being constrained by these expectations, especially if they cannot easily meet those expectations because of how others view them in light of their race or gender. For example, for returning professionals of color, if they had already established a sense of professional identity that affirmed their racial identity, it would feel especially discouraging to be back in a space where they had to defend or fight to be seen as professionals due to their racial identity.

Working Content in the Liminal Space

I now turn my focus to the ways participants experienced tensions between the working content of their professional identity and their academic identity while in the liminal space of doctoral education. Working content, as described above, is how I am describing the skills and knowledge necessary to do the work at hand. The working content of their professional identity is the skills and knowledge participants developed while working before coming back to school. The working content of their academic identity is the skills and knowledge they are developing while in school. Please refer to Figure 6.2 from above as a reminder of how these constructs work together.

There were two main ways that these tensions surfaced. The first way was a dissonance in identity. Many participants felt a sense of confidence and expertise in the working content of

their professional identities while also feeling a sense of uncertainty in the working content of their academic identities. The second way was a dissonance informed by their professional trajectories. Felt primarily by those who were preparing for careers outside of academia, this dissonance was centered around the perceived preference within the academy for jobs in academia. This perceived preference could lead to the invalidation of participants' already established knowledge and skills (the working content held by their professional identity). I will explore both of those areas of dissonance in the sections below.

Considering identities: Experts in their memories. The first way being in a liminal space impacted many participants was a contrast in having felt some level of confidence and expertise in the working content of their professional identity and the subsequent feeling of being a novice in the working content of their academic identity. Several participants, when asked what they missed about being working professionals, mentioned how much they missed feeling like they knew what they were doing and engaging in the use of skills and expertise that they had honed over many years. They missed counting on their reputations to be understood as a form of currency, especially those doing work within communities. They came to doctoral education with a future in mind--the final stage of the transformation where they re-enter the "real world" with the new skills and expertise they have gained in school and a credential that they anticipate will be a new form of currency. In the meantime, however, they are operating in this liminal space where they no longer feel connected to that previous source of confidence and are instead feeling the lack of confidence that comes from being a novice. Rosanna conceptualized this feeling with a useful analogy: it was as if she had ripped out her own kitchen cabinets without having the skills to put in new ones, leaving her without a functional kitchen. She had left her job and reputation behind her, and to her, it resulted in a loss of identity and confidence. She

fears that at the end of the liminal state, she will not re-enter the world of professional work as a transformed person but as an incomplete person who does not function well in her past space or her future space.

Career development theorist Herminia Ibarra (2005) has argued that liminal spaces exist when a person is in the midst of a career change. The liminal space during a career change, according to Ibarra's model, is one of identity conflict and feeling the loss of an old identity without yet having a replacement for it. Ibarra explores "conditions under which new possible selves become robust enough to compare with older, still reinforced identities" (Ibarra, 2005, p. 7). These possible selves are new identities that people have played with or tried on in an attempt to find a new professional identity. In Ibarra's work, people are moving from one career to another career, and they anticipate that their new career will be a place they can land. Returning professionals are moving from one career to a temporary state of being a graduate student before landing in a new career (or returning to an old one). They know it will be years before they land in another career, and the identity they have taken on as a graduate student may feel more unsettling to them precisely because they know it is temporary. They know they will have to build a new identity in a new career once they leave graduate school. The academic identity is a means to an end for them, not an end in itself, which helps explain Rosanna's feeling that the form she has taken now feels incomplete. She feels like a novice as a graduate student, and since her identity as a graduate student is temporary, she does not have a new, robust professional identity to support her.

Other participants, like Rosanna, had advanced in their previous careers to high levels of status and when operating out of their professional identities in those old settings, they felt they were in their prime, very confident in their skills and abilities. To no longer feel that level of

confidence in themselves was disorienting and at times brought about a sense of fear. Have I lost my edge? How will I get it back? When the working content of their academic identities was not a source of confidence but of uncertainty, some participants wrestled with feelings of the imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). This feeling of not being confident and not belonging in graduate school may contribute to feeling that a career in academia is not a good fit. Several participants entered their programs with the idea of a career in academia but changed their minds after they started. It is possible that they experienced graduate school as a place where they could not imagine themselves belonging as well as they did in their previous career. They know what it feels like to belong in their careers, so to feel a sense of not belonging may make them instinctively recoil from moving forward. After coming from a place of being established, they may have less tolerance for the ambiguity of not belonging yet. The imposter syndrome has been shown to negatively impact career planning and career striving (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Regardless of how it may have impacted their views of themselves working in academia, however, persistent feelings of insecurity can contribute to high levels of stress and dissatisfaction. The imposter phenomenon or syndrome is associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety (Clance & Imes, 1978; Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998). The presence of these dynamics for returning professionals would certainly negatively impact their experience in graduate education.

For those in assistantships that used a similar skill set to skills they used in their past, some experienced an additional complication in this liminal space because there was overlap between the working content of their professional identity and their academic identity: they are using the specific skills and knowledge they had used in their previous work to accomplish the work of their assistantships. For example, Michael had been a grant writer for the government

and was employed by MSU as a graduate assistant to help other graduate students write grants to apply for funding. He went from competing for and winning multi-million dollar grants to helping students apply for grants of a few thousand dollars. Michael talked about how this sometimes challenged his ego, feeling like the work he was doing was beneath his capacity. This feeling of being underemployed is one that has been studied in the field of career development, and it is one that many people in post-recession economies must face. Those who are considered status-underemployed (meaning that their current job is of a lower status than expected on the basis of their background) are at risk of lower health and wellbeing outcomes, including higher rates of depression and lower levels of positive self-concept (Friedland & Price, 2003). Michael, with his impressive background, knows he could be operating in a job with higher status than that of a graduate assistant. He came from that kind of job and is temporarily performing his skills in a job with relatively lower status. He describes the effort he puts in to remind himself that this is a temporary status change, which helps ameliorate the negative feelings he experiences.

Considering trajectories: Where are you going? Not every participant felt a sense of dissonance between the working content of their professional and academic identities. The participants who planned to have careers in academia came to their programs with the intention to reform their professional identities into something new. Those participants experienced this liminal state not as a destruction of or threat to their professional identity, but rather as the addition of a new identity or a welcome reformation of an old identity. For them, the person-vocation fit was a strong match, meaning their career goals were well supported by their academic experiences (Baker and Pifer, 2015). Anne remarked that the PhD had “professionalized” her, a professionalization that was different from the one she had when she

worked in an emergency room as a clerk and one that she would need for her future career as an academic. Participants like Anne were aware at some level that graduate school would involve leaving some of the working content of their professional identity behind them, as the PhD was the beginning of a new chapter in their careers. They wanted to participate actively in the ritual of being incorporated into a new identity, and were willing to be reshaped or reformed in some ways.

For returning professionals who did not intend to pursue careers in academia, the academic identity was one they only needed to take on temporarily. For some of them, they were able to “play the student” as needed and did not feel a sense of threat to their existing professional identity. The working content of their professional identity may not have been validated or recognized in the academic space, but they viewed the academic space as a temporary state and were able to keep their identities functioning separately. Some, like Peter, viewed their time in graduate school as a season of professional development where they could put the working content of their professional identity aside and then pick it up again after graduation. They were willing and able to “bracket” their professional identity for a season.

For other participants who did not intend to pursue careers in academia, it was harder to “play the student.” They felt the lack of understanding or support for their career trajectory in a way that had a negative impact on their experience. This lack of support at times felt like an invalidation of the knowledge and expertise they had done before coming back to higher education. It also felt invalidating to the purpose for which they had come to graduate school. Since doctoral education is heavily weighted toward preparing future faculty, the participants in my study who were not planning on careers in the academy had to navigate perceived and actual messages that their work in the past and future was seen as “less than.”

For some participants, the working content of their professional identity was integral to the work they were doing in their graduate programs as well as the work they hoped to do in their future careers. Because of this continuity, they were neither willing nor able to separate their professional and academic identity, so a threat to one was a threat to both. A few participants in particular viewed themselves as activists, by which I mean their professional work involved advocating for a cause that was very important to them. Sucre, for example, positioned herself as an educational activist. Her professional identity is informed by a cause, which is to address systemic issues in the US education system that she sees as detrimental to the heart of education itself. Doctoral education for her is a pathway to living out her role as an activist as she challenges the education system. So, in her case, in this liminal space of graduate education, when she feels that her educational goals are not supported, she is not able to separate the working content of her academic identity from the working content of her professional identity because, to her, they are deeply connected. She may be learning new skills and knowledge (working content) in graduate school, but those skills and knowledge have meaning to her because of the way they will help her continue to advocate for her cause. A contrast would be Steve, who was intentional in not thinking about his work as part of his identity at all. If he were to feel his educational goals were not supported, he would not view it as a threat to his identity because he holds his identity as separate from his work and therefore, his academics. Having a cohesive identity, one where the professional and academic are experienced as one and the same, puts participants in a place of greater vulnerability. The liminal space is a place that, by not recognizing or valuing their previous working content, is trying to reform something that these participants do not want reformed. Those with an activist mentality were the ones who were most actively resistant to the socialization of graduate education.

Implications for Practice

Returning professionals have more expertise and more to offer than is often recognized during their time as graduate students. In light of this finding, it was important to me that the recommendations section reflected the value we ought to have for returning professionals by leaning on their wisdom. The following section draws heavily from participant recommendations in the findings section as well as some of my own thoughts, and as a returning professional myself, I am happy to have a place to add my own ideas informed both by my own experience and now, by the analysis of the data I collected. The first section focuses on our recommendations for advisors working with returning professionals and for graduate programs, and the second section focuses on our advice for other returning professionals.

Recommendations for Graduate Programs

Several participants made recommendations for early interventions with returning professionals. These early interventions included more comprehensive orientations that focused on details for how to navigate their programs as well as resources available for graduate students. Graduate students are often less likely to be aware of campus resources (Hagedorn, 2015), and like many returning adult learners, those who have been out of the higher education setting for longer may be even less aware of the type of programs, offices and support systems that they could use for help. To be the most helpful for returning professionals, these orientations should have a break out section for those making a return to school after working professionally. To name and normalize the identity shifts and possible tensions they are likely to face will help ease some of the transitional stress. It would also allow returning professionals to identify each other and to know they are not alone.

Another kind of early intervention would be to pair incoming returning professionals with returning professionals who are more advanced in the program. It would be helpful and validating to see other returning professionals and to be able to talk to them about their experience. Connecting incoming returning professionals to others helps them begin to form what Baker and Pifer (2011) call developmental networks early in their programs. “The relationships and interactions that create the sociocultural context and developmental networks in which doctoral student learning is situated provide meaning, efficacy, and identity development (Baker & Pifer, 2011, p. 15). It would also help to train and equip mentors with resources that directly and intentionally address the identity shift that returning professionals may experience and to talk about where those shifts are likely to cause friction. For example, creating a worksheet with guided questions would help mentors and mentees have a productive conversation about the transition to being a graduate student by priming the mentor to talk about specific examples of how they navigated that transition.

Many participants noted that their programs and advisors could have done a better job of affirming and preparing them for careers outside of academia. PhD students in general are having an increasingly difficult time finding jobs in academia and as the market has become more saturated, doctoral programs have been slow to respond (Nerad, 2004). Participants who were intending to find new careers or keep previous careers outside of academia perceived a lack of support for their career direction. For returning professionals who came to their programs in order to further their careers outside of academia, being in an environment built for those preparing for academic careers could feel isolating. They could feel that their previous work and their future trajectory were not as valued or supported, which leads to dissatisfaction with their programs or worse, feelings of marginalization for their goals.

In order to increase support, programs could give intentional access to alumni databases so returning professionals (or anyone seeking careers outside of academia) could connect with alumni who had found careers in different contexts. Programs could also offer internships as an option for those who wanted to gain practical experience that would help them prepare for other kinds of jobs. Internships could be completed as independent studies or offered for credit in some capacity, which would prevent adding additional barriers for students trying to obtain practical work experiences. Giving credit for internship opportunities would also serve as a form of validation for these experiences, demonstrating that there is more than one career direction that is worth pursuing. Another idea that is more specifically geared for returning professionals would be to organize a cross-discipline meet and greet, where returning professionals from different programs could share their stories and share tips, resources and access to their own professional networks with each other. A meeting like this one could also be a valuable way for students who have not worked previously to gain insight and access to resources for careers outside of academia.

Some participants, beyond feeling a lack of support, noted feeling “written off” for their career trajectories and they felt like outsiders in their programs. Finding tangible and institutionalized ways to validate and support a multitude of career options would help address this sense of being marginalized for their career direction. One suggestion would be to highlight and support students who want to write and publish in other types of places than peer-reviewed journals. If their trajectory is outside of academia, what type of work can they do while they are in graduate school that is both for credit and recognized as valuable in the contexts they plan to work? If programs can make room for this kind of work in the academic space, students will have more time to devote to work that will help their career development instead of having to

pursue these projects on the side. I agree with the growing number of voices that argue that cultural and structural changes are needed within doctoral education in order to support the diversity of career paths available to those who earn PhDs (Baker & Pifer, 2015; Boud & Tennant, 2006; McAlpine, 2012; Nerad, 2004).

In line with the idea of creating channels to communicate support and validation for returning professionals, programs could host brown bag seminars where returning professionals could share expertise gained in the previous careers. This opportunity would help demonstrate that their expertise was seen as valuable and would affirm that other sources of knowledge such as work experience do have a place in academia. Another place where this previously developed expertise could be brought to bear is in the classroom. Several participants noted that they had critiques for how certain projects were being handled in class, and that these projects would not meet the standards of their industry. How can academia make room for those with professional experience to bring that experience to higher education in a way that sharpens teaching and learning for everyone? Would it be possible, for example, to create an anonymous feedback loop where students could offer suggestions for how some projects could be improved so that students are better prepared to meet industry standards once they graduate? Certainly not every project needs to have that same level of precision, and the academic venture is one where students should have projects that are geared to their level of expertise and that challenge them to grow in their skills and capacity. However, it seems that much good could come from taking advantage of the expertise that resides within returning professionals. Allowing those with experience to speak with some level of authority challenges the bias that knowledge production within the academic setting is ultimately superior to the knowledge that is gained through experience.

A final recommendation for graduate programs is to find better ways to hold advisors and other faculty accountable to program expectations. Some participants felt very frustrated with fluid expectations that were handled differently from advisor to advisor. They felt subject to personal bias at times without sufficient options to address the inequities they perceived. This is a systemic issue that goes beyond returning professionals, but, since many of them are used to having more channels in the professional world to address problems and to advocate for themselves, they seemed to feel particularly frustrated by being so vulnerable. This tension was especially felt for participants in the dissertation stage, where they did not have as many milestones or benchmarks due to the individual nature of their research. If programs could treat timelines and deadlines as contracts that both sides were accountable to uphold, it would alleviate some of the feelings of vulnerability for returning professionals.

Recommendations for Faculty and Advisors

In addition to recommendations for programs, my study also surfaced several concrete recommendations for faculty and advisors who are working directly with returning professionals. As with formal orientations, when welcoming returning professionals to their programs, advisors can play an important role by naming and recognizing returning professionals' unique position. To have their advisor intentionally address the identity work that will likely need to happen would be incredibly validating and could lessen feelings of insecurity that many of my participants reported. Advisors can give returning professionals advanced notice about some of the elements of the liminal space they are entering and offer some guidance in helping navigate that space.

Advisors are also in a unique position to help returning professionals understand and navigate program expectations. When orientations are long behind them, graduate students need

ongoing guidance to make informed choices for how to move through their programs. This is a role advisors play with every advisee; however, there are a few specific things they could keep in mind while advising returning professionals. The more advisors are familiar with an advisee's past professional experience and are in tune with their future aspirations, the more they can ensure returning professionals get the most out of their graduate school experience. They can help returning professionals think outside of the box in terms of opportunities for professional development, independent studies, or fellowships that offer practical experience. They can also offer ways to make connections between their "old world" and their "new world." Sue, for example, was able to arrange for a research project in her previous workplace that both gave her valuable research experience while also helping her former colleagues conduct a needs assessment. Returning professionals benefit greatly when their advisors give them room to think creatively about integrating the old and new selves and validate intentional efforts to make connections between those selves.

Since many of the tensions returning professionals experienced took place in their role as graduate assistants, it is important for faculty and staff who are supervising returning professionals to recognize these tensions and help their supervisees navigate them. For example, when a supervisor can take the time to learn about and affirm supervisee's previous professional experience, they can begin to understand and empathize with how returning professionals may feel when working in their assistantships. Supervisors can validate possible feelings of frustration while also coaching returning professionals for how to respond if they are feeling underemployed or micromanaged in their role as graduate assistants. At times, returning professionals may also need to be reminded that the work they are being asked to do is valuable and necessary, regardless if they may feel capable of doing more advanced work. Supervisors do

not need to apologize for the tasks that their supervisees are asked to do, no matter how much experience they had coming into the program. They can, however, acknowledge this dynamic in a way that is understanding and empathetic. When possible, supervisors can tailor assignments to fit any relevant expertise a returning professional may bring to their role. For example, I was a graduate assistant with experience in human resources and leadership development, and a former supervisor had me speak to one of her classes about this content area. It was very affirming to have my responsibilities be shaped by my previous experiences. This approach takes more time and does not allow for a “one size fits all” approach to graduate assistantships, but it is an opportunity to validate returning professionals that also allows higher education to benefit from these students’ expertise while they are here.

Advice for Returning Professionals

Participants strongly encouraged other returning professionals to view their own experiences as valuable no matter how they were being received. Participants advised others in their position to regard their maturity and experience as valuable and to know they can rely on having a perspective and a set of skills that they did not have before their professional lives began. There may be times when returning professionals feel frustrated by the lack of understanding or validation of their previous work experience, and it is important that they do not let those frustrations chip away at their self esteem, confidence, and motivation to succeed.

Returning professionals would also benefit from keeping and nurturing their sense of themselves as professionals. One way they can nurture their personal professionalism is to maintain the same standards they had in their professional lives, which might mean returning emails within a certain time frame or might dictate how they interact with faculty or support staff. It is also important that they find ways to keep their professional skills sharp, either by

finding ways to use them within their graduate programs or outside of graduate school. Several participants noted feeling a dip in their confidence. Because they had focused on work for their programs, they had spent years without performing the work they had done previously. They now felt “rusty” in those skills and felt like it would be a challenge to even return to their old jobs at their previous level. It is important to determine which skills to keep active and, at times, it may require a sacrifice to make time to keep them sharp, but it can be a strong protective factor in terms of confidence and identity later on.

Returning professionals should also consider the cost of a PhD program before deciding if a PhD is truly right for them. For some, the cost may be the amount of time they would need to invest in getting a PhD. Prospective students could spend time “dabbling” in the field before committing to a program, as the commitment is intensive and lengthy. This upfront investment would help prospective students make sure they knew that the field they were getting their PhD in was one they were well suited to work in because it would be a costly mistake to find that the field was not a good fit. For others, the cost will be more about the emotional shift that they experience when moving from a professional career to the role of a graduate student. It may help them to know they may feel like an outsider and that they might need to give themselves extra time to adjust. And finally, for some, the cost to consider is a literal financial cost. There may be a loss of “money-making years.” Returning professionals’ earning potential is significantly higher later in their careers than it was earlier in their career, so taking a substantial pay cut at this point in their career is a larger sacrifice. Financial situations can also change drastically during the course of a PhD program, and even for those who think they are prepared for the financial risk, it pays to have more than one safety net.

My participants had a wealth of valuable recommendations that it was my pleasure to record, interpret, and report. I have tried to do justice to their thoughts and experiences so that future returning professionals have the opportunity to prepare themselves even better for their graduate education. I hope that these recommendations also serve to inform the practices of advisors and graduate program directors as they support returning professionals from all kinds of backgrounds and are better able to recognize, affirm and learn from the expertise and experience that returning professionals bring with them to the context of higher education.

Implications for Theory

My study surfaced many important implications and recommendations for practice for programs, faculty, advisors, and returning professionals. It also surfaced important implications for theory, particularly for theories and models of graduate student socialization. As discussed in depth in my literature review, graduate student socialization refers to the process by which individuals learn the knowledge, abilities, norms and values for successful entry into a given profession (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). Golde (1998) described graduate school as a unique case of “double socialization,” and went on to explain: “New students are simultaneously directly socialized into the role of graduate student and are given preparatory socialization into graduate student life and the future career common to most doctoral students” (p. 56). These models presume that common future career to be a job as a faculty member with the ideal role being a full-time, tenure-track faculty job. Full-time, tenure-track faculty jobs are much harder to come by these days, but they still serve as the gold standard for the job doctoral students perceive they are being trained to do. Even many critiques of graduate student socialization models still have the assumption that the end goal of socialization is the production of well-prepared faculty members (Gonzales, 2006; Sallee, 2011; Taylor & Antony, 2000).

According to the findings of my study, in order to best serve the increasing diversity of students coming to doctoral education, we need models of socialization that account for a wider view of possible careers for doctoral students. If socialization is preparing people for how to be successful in a particular job, it creates a binary where people who get that job are successful and people who do not get that job, even if they are not trying to get that job, are unsuccessful. This binary can lead people to feel like their future careers, if outside of academia, are not as valuable and not as supported. Graduate student socialization, with its dual emphasis, must prepare people to be successful doctoral students. It also, however, must affirm more than one pathway and more than one destination. A robust model of graduate student socialization would guide programs, faculty and students alike to a process that affirms and accommodates a multitude of possible successful outcomes for students. This process must be dynamic and co-constructed and must have corresponding institutional structures and processes. For example, guidance committees could be more intentional about tailoring comprehensive exams procedures and program requirements to fit the intended outcomes of students. This would undoubtedly create new sources of stress, as it would require more work on the parts of faculty and program coordinators to support such individual tracks. It would also open up possible concerns that each student graduating from a given program would have different metrics by which they were given the same degree. However, it does seem possible to have more than one standardized process that could be adjusted within certain parameters. For example, there could be several styles of comprehensive exams that could be matched to a particular student's professional goals, or tracks for preparing students for an academic job versus a job outside of academia. Different academic programs each have different processes or metrics for academic milestones; why not have more than one process or metric within programs?

We also need models that intentionally affirm and preserve the attributes graduate students bring with them to doctoral education. In Weidman, Twale and Stein's (2001) graduate student socialization model, the Personal stage, is described as internalizing the new expectations of academia. Internalizing implies acceptance and does not leave room for participants to reject or resist aspects of that socialization that does not fit them. Whether or not it is intended, some students experience graduate socialization as divestiture, a process that disconfirms initiates' previous values and behaviors (van Maanen, 1976). It is not necessary for incoming doctoral students to be stripped of their previous identities to become successful in whatever career they choose, be it in or out of academia. In fact, if the goals of higher education are to have a truly diverse and inclusive assembly of faculty, staff and students, it must become a place where existing identities are welcomed, nurtured and integrated into everything done in that setting.

The Personal stage of socialization is also described as a time of reconciling the "incongruity between their previous self-image and their new professional image" (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001, p. 14). This description does not account for any existing professional image that doctoral students may have developed prior to graduate school. Weidman, Twale and Stein (2001) do mention taking students' background as a factor of socialization, but do not say how it should be factored in. It also does not account for the possible integration of any existing professional image with this new image that is being given to them through the process of socialization. McAlpine, in her work on identity-trajectories, argued for "nesting the academic within the personal and incorporating students' pasts as well as imagined futures" (2012, p. 38). She advocated for research and policy that affirmed both where doctoral students have been and where they are going in a way that engages their personal agency and makes doctoral education an investment that makes sense on their terms (McAlpine, 2012). This type of affirming

socialization experience, which van Maanen called investiture, intentionally bolsters the newcomers' values and behaviors and considers their previously developed knowledge and expertise as an asset (van Maanen, 1976). Not all of my participants experienced either of the extremes of divestiture or investiture, but my findings certainly argue for moving intentionally toward investiture and toward theories and models that account for the wide diversity of students' past experiences and future goals.

Limitations of Study and Directions for Future Research

As with any research venture, my study had limitations that are important to address. The first is that I am a returning professional myself. I acknowledge the unavoidable presence of bias on my part to project my own experiences and assumptions about the graduate school experience onto my participants' words. I addressed the specific ways I attempted to keep my biases from allowing me to truly hear my participants' stories, included having participants conduct member checks and having a "critical friend" look over some segments of the data. However, I cannot affirm that no bias remained, nor do I think it is possible to remove all bias from the process. I also believe that being a member of the community I was studying allowed me to build stronger rapport than if I had been an outsider to that community, which made these limitations worth the risk.

Another limitation was the small sample size. I interviewed twelve participants who came from six different colleges at the same large public institution. That means even at that particular institution, there were returning professionals in other colleges that I did not interview and I do not know if their experiences were similar or different from my participants. It is possible that college or department culture contributes more to the results of my study than I am able to see with so few numbers. For example, in some programs, such as my own, it is very

common for students to come in with many years of work experience. Being a returning professional in my program meant having a lot of people around me going through similar things and having faculty that were aware of and took my previous experience into account when supervising me. In other programs, it is more common for people to come in straight from undergraduate programs, so being a returning professional in those programs would likely feel more isolating. They may not have faculty who think intentionally about their previous work experience. Some programs focus more on faculty preparation while others support a broader range of future pathways, and returning professionals would have different experiences within those programs depending on the fit between program expectations and their own goals. Some departments have a more supportive culture around issues like work-life balance, which would arguably create a better environment for returning professionals. Since discipline and departmental culture both appear to matter to the experience of returning professionals, it would be useful to get a much broader sample. Future research should have enough participants to look for larger patterns among those in specific disciplines and specific programs within those disciplines. Since each discipline has its own subculture and socializes its graduate students accordingly, it would be necessary to have more participants from each discipline in order to see how those differences impact the experience of returning professionals.

My study took place at one institution. It would be interesting to compare experiences of returning professionals across institutions and institution types, although the majority of doctoral students are going to be found at research institutions, especially full-time doctoral students who are funded by assistantships. If programs are funded differently, it could be useful to see if the type or level of compensation and the benefits offered to students impacted the returning professional experience, as those metrics are part of what several participants pointed to as

markers of being treated as a professional. For example, in most professional settings, applicants for jobs are used to being able to negotiate their salary or other benefits of their job, such as title, vacation days, duties, etc. This ability to negotiate can reflect and impact how valued someone feels in a new job or the perceived value their work has to their new company. How do the pay and benefits offered to returning professionals as graduate students impact their perception of the work they are being asked to do? How does it inform the way they think others perceive their work? It would be very interesting to explore the connection between compensation and perception of their work by self and others in the academic setting.

Another limitation of my study was that I was not able to talk to many returning professionals of color, as 9 of my 12 participants identified as white. I was able to interview three women who identified as women of color but no males. Doctoral students of color have a different experience than their white peers, and it would be very worthwhile to learn more about students of color who worked professionally before starting their PhD programs. The research so far has focused on students from racially minoritized backgrounds in graduate education broadly, but to my knowledge, there have been no studies focusing on students of color who had worked professionally before returning to school. Based on my findings, I argue that it is important to factor in their previous life experience when accounting for their experience in graduate school. How did their racial identity shape the development of their professional identity? How did the culture of the setting they worked in inform how they view themselves as professionals? If they came from jobs where their racial identity was integral to the work they were doing, how did that impact their transition to doctoral education? Focusing on returning professionals of color would shed light on some of the racialized dynamics of graduate education that are very difficult to discern. Another area for future research would be asking how people

from different cultural backgrounds, especially identities that have been historically marginalized in the United States, view professionalism and how those differences come into play when folks with professional experience enter into doctoral education. Looking at returning professionals who are also international students was beyond the scope of my study but would also help us understand some of the problematic ways we think of and operationalize professionalism in the academic setting.

A final limitation I will mention was that I was not able to make comparisons with other populations of doctoral students which makes it difficult to narrow down how much the participants were being impacted by their professional identity and how much was due to other factors, such as age, stage of life or having made a major transition in life. For example, if I was able to talk to students who had gone straight through from their undergraduate or master's programs right into doctoral programs, I would have been able to see if there were any similarities in their experience. Those similarities would help me tease out which effects were more likely due to having professional experience, although it is still possibly due to other factors as well. If I had been able to talk to doctoral students who were still working in their fields while in school, that could have also helped me identify how much of the experience of my participants was due to having an existing professional identity. In that case, I would be able to more easily factor out age and stage of life, as these doctoral students would be of similar age as my participants.

Another avenue for future research would be to conduct a study comparing the experience of returning professionals with students who went straight into doctoral programs without any breaks from formal education. These "straight through" students may have worked all through their time as students, but many of them have only had part-time jobs and they are

more likely to experience their primary identity as students, not as professionals. It would be interesting to talk to those students about their experiences in their doctoral programs to try to identify what types of differences in experience exist and of those differences, what are truly due to having a pre-existing professional identity? I was not able to determine what percentage of returning professionals' experience was due to having a professional identity and what was due to them simply being older and more mature. Future studies would need to find a way to tease that difference apart in order to isolate professional identity as a factor.

Another direction for future research would be to compare the experiences of returning professionals, who were no longer working in their fields, to doctoral students who maintain their jobs while being in school. How does maintaining an active operation of their professional identity change the way they experience doctoral education? For some programs, it is not an option to remain working and they must come in as full-time students, so there would be some inherent limitations in this kind of study. However, in order to truly isolate and understand the effects of professional identity on the doctoral student experience, this comparison would be necessary.

A final direction that I recommend for future research would be to compare the experiences of returning professionals to the experiences of returning adult learners who return to school at different levels. How does the experience of a returning professional going back to school to get a PhD differ from a returning adult learner who is in a bachelor's or master's program? By making these comparisons, we will learn more about how to support returning adult learners at every stage and every level of postsecondary education. By seeing areas of difference and similarity in experience, we may also be able to identify some of the dynamics

specific to doctoral education that support and hinder positive professional identity development for all doctoral students.

Conclusion

Returning professionals are a unique and interesting subset of doctoral students. They have chosen to pursue doctoral education after years of professional work and they bring valuable experiences and perspectives with them. They also bring with them a sense of professional identity that has developed during those years before their doctoral education began. Their professional identity has guided them through career moves and has been shaped by those career moves. It has led them into doctoral education and will shape and be shaped by their time as graduate students. While they are here, their sense of expertise and confidence may be challenged or nurtured, wounded or developed further. I sincerely hope that this study helps returning professionals to get the most out of their time in graduate school and offers a perspective to help position themselves as learners who also have a lot to offer. Returning professionals inhabit a liminal space that exists between previous professional work and the work they will do in the future. With some intentional effort on their part and the part of the faculty and staff who are in a position to support them, they can leave this liminal space better equipped to make the kind of impact they hope to make on the world around them.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Consent Form

Returning Professionals in Doctoral Programs

Consent Form

Research Study Description: This study explores the experience of returning adult learners in doctoral programs, specifically those who are no longer working full-time and are attending school full-time. This study explores the following research questions: How do returning professionals in doctoral programs experience the shift in their role from being a full-time worker to being a full-time graduate student? Do they experience tensions between the expectations of their former role as a professional and their current role as a graduate student? If so, how do they navigate these tensions? What factors contribute to how they experience graduate school? The study is being conducted by Megumi Akehi, PhD Candidate in the Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education (HALE) Program at Michigan State University (MSU) for her dissertation under the direction of Dr. Ann Austin, Associate Dean for Research and Professor of HALE in the Department of Educational Administration at MSU.

Procedures: You are being asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded. You will be asked a series of questions about your professional background and your experiences in graduate school as related to the research questions listed above. You will also be contacted for a follow up interview which will be designed to clarify and extend what you share in the first interview.

Risks and Benefits: You will incur minimal risk by participating in this study. Some questions may cause slight emotional discomfort, as you may be asked to talk about about experiences that may have been frustrating or uncomfortable. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer specific questions and you may end your participation at any time for any reason. Every effort will be made to protect your anonymity. You will choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study, and your responses will be reported in a way that will protect your anonymity. Digital data will be stored in password protected files on a password protected laptop and will be kept for at least three years.

Compensation: You will receive a gift card for \$25 for your participation upon the completion of the first interview.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues or how to do any part of it, please contact the researcher, Meg Akehi, Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, 419A Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, akehimeg@msu.edu, (513) 461-6335.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocols

Interview 1 Protocol

These are the types of questions I anticipate asking participants. The exact wording of the questions will vary depending on the nature of participants' responses.

Opening script

My name is Meg Akehi and I am doctoral candidate here. For my dissertation research, I am exploring the experiences of doctoral students who are no longer working full-time and are full-time students. I am specifically interested in discussing what the shift in roles and responsibilities was like as you went from being a working professional to being a doctoral student. I am interested in learning if returning professionals, as I call them, experience tensions between their sense of who they are as professionals and who they are as doctoral students.

I became interested in this subject because it was an experience that I had myself, having worked for 15 years in the nonprofit sector before coming back to get a PhD. There were many others in my cohort that were in a similar position and we talked about it often. It interested me so much that I decided to study it for my dissertation.

Guiding Question 1	This section will help me determine the nature of participants' professional identity.	Tell me about what you did before starting your PhD
Possible prompts:	This section is designed to help me see if their professional identity was stronger or weaker coming into graduate school.	• Let's walk through your background using your resume. Starting from when you graduated from undergrad, tell me about what you had done before starting your PhD. • Describe your most recent job in more detail. What kind of work was it? • How important was your job to you? Was it just a place to work, or was it work that you were passionate about? • Tell me about a professional accomplishment of which you feel particularly proud
	This question will help me get situated in the participant's story, as family and stage of life will be an important part of their experience in school.	• What was your stage of life when you began grad school? (Age, Married, partnered, single? Kids – ages?)

Guiding Question 2	This section will help me determine what kind of a shift it was to return to school. I expect harder transitions will make the role change more salient and possibly more challenging.	What factors contributed to your decision to go back to get a PhD?
Possible prompts:		• Why did you decide to return to school at the time that you did? • What do you hope the PhD will do for you? • How did you make the decision to quit your job? ○ Was it an option to keep your job and go to school part-time? ○ Did it feel like a risk to you to quit your job?
	This question will help me identify the expectations participants had, if any, of being a returning professional	• How did you expect your professional experiences to impact your experience in your graduate program? ○ Did you think your professional background would be an asset, a drawback, or a combination of these?
Guiding Question 3	This section is designed to elicit stories about intra-role conflict, if there are any.	What has it been like being a graduate student?
Possible prompts:		• What do you like about being a full-time student? • What is your assistantship? How has it been working in that role? Do you feel like you are treated as a professional in that role? Do you want to be treated as a professional in that role? • What do you miss about being a working professional? • Do you still think of yourself as a “professional?” In what ways? • Do you seek out professional development opportunities within or outside of your program? • Do you feel that your professional

		experiences have been recognized and valued by faculty? In what ways? ○ Your supervisor for your assistantship? ○ Your peers? • Do you find yourself having to “switch gears” between being in professional mode and being in student mode? Can you think of a concrete example? What is that like for you?
Final Question	This question gives an opportunity to reflect on what has been shared and major “life lessons”	What advice would you give to people who were in a similar life situation as you?

Closing script

Thank you so much for meeting with me! Here is your gift card as a token of appreciation for your time, which I know is valuable. I will be contacting you soon for a follow up interview which I anticipate only being 30 minutes long.

Interview 2 Protocol

These are the types of questions I anticipate asking participants. The exact wording of the questions will vary depending on the nature of participants' responses.

Opening script

Thank you so much for agreeing to this second interview. I know you have a lot on your plate! My main goal here is to explore your experience of graduate school in more depth.

Guiding Question 1	This section will allow the participant to share any insights they have thought about since the first interview.	Have you thought more about the topic of returning to graduate school as someone with professional experience? If so, what have you thought about?
Guiding Question 2	Photo elicitation exercise, which may solicit a different type of information about participants' identity and experiences	Would you be willing to use a visual exercise to describe your time in your program?
Possible prompts:		• Which picture represents how you felt about yourself in your job (the one you held most recently)? • What picture represents how you felt during your first year in your program? • What picture represents how you feel about your experience currently?
Guiding Question 3	This section is designed to elicit other identity-related factors that affected their experience in grad school	How do you think other aspects of your identity influenced your experience of graduate school?
Possible prompts:		• Race • Gender • Sexual orientation • Ability • Class • Other
Guiding	This question explores institutional support	Did you find your program to be a supportive environment for your ongoing

Question 4	mechanisms/barriers to support	professional development?
Possible prompts:		• Could your program have done anything differently to better prepare you and/or support you? • Could you have done/can you do anything differently to support your own professional development while in your program?

APPENDIX C: Code Books and Data Piles

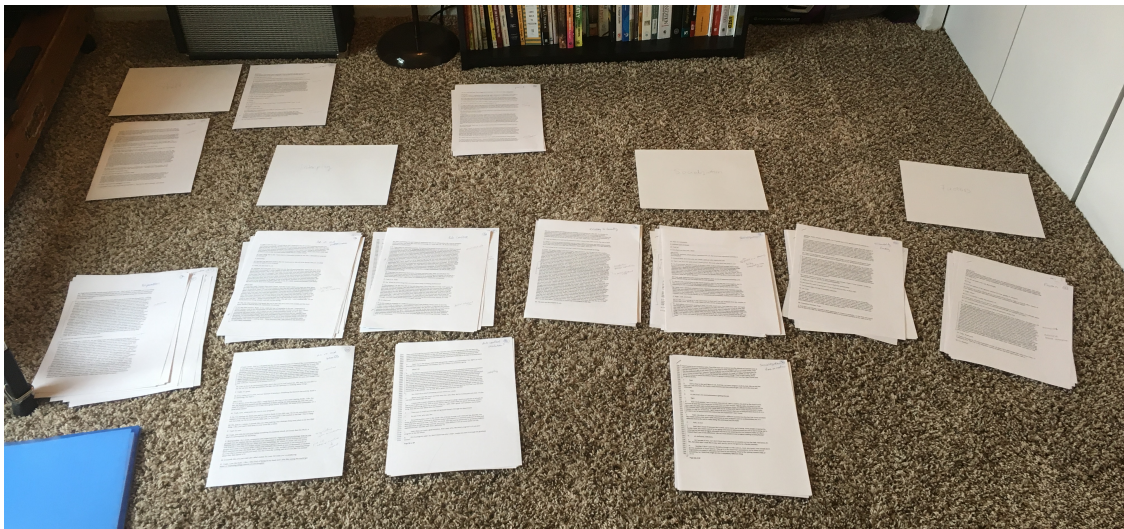
1. Deductive codes

Losses	Things one gives up to return to school (income, status, control over time, etc.)
Gains	Things one gains when returning to school (flexibility, focus on studies, less responsibility, etc.)
Challenges	Obstacles returning professionals face while in school (relationship strain, role conflicts, power dynamics, etc.)
Socialization	External pressures and expectations of doctoral education from faculty, other students, program
Interplay	How previous experience shapes grad school experience (choices and goals)
Obstacles to returning	Challenges that had to be overcome to return to school full time (partner support, finances, etc.)
Strategic moves	How professional experience informed decision making (goals, positions, dissertation topic, etc.)
Mentorship	Definitions/expectations of mentorship, where it was available (or not), and quality of experience
Reactions to previous exp	Positive and negative reactions of faculty and advisors to previous work experience
Contrasts	Role conflicts, not fitting in to the expected order of things, awkward moments

2. Code book – second version

Professional Identity	
Description	WHAT they did before PhD
Trajectory	What patterns did they demonstrate in their career moves? (WHEN)
Conceptual	How did they conceptualize themselves as professionals? WHO are they as professionals
Drivers	What motivated them in their career choices? WHY did they do what they did?
Professionalism	How did they define professionalism (HOW they did their work)
1. Shift to grad school	
Liminal space - general	Feeling of being inbetween two worlds, not here but not yet there
Liminal space - "real work"	How does the academy view the work of graduate students?
Liminal space - rel with faculty	Ways returning professionals related to faculty informed by their previous work experience
2. Tensions	
Student vs. Professional	Playing the student, role conflicts, needing to "stay in your lane"
	When previous work informed current work
Academia vs. Industry - standards	Different and competing expectations of professionalism/standards
Academia vs. Industry - goals	Different notions of success, what is the end product expected/measured/valued
3. Socialization	
Socialization - general	How to do re-pro experience socialization (thinking, writing, acting like doc students)?
Fac vs non fac track	How career goals were treated by faculty: more support for students on the faculty track
Vulnerabilities	Unique ways returning professionals are vulnerable to some of the dynamics of grad school

3. Picture of my “data piles”



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