

Bridging Gaps and Enhancing Access: A Model for Graduate Assistant Training (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Graduate assistants (GAs) play a critical role in postsecondary disability resource offices (DROs), offering vital support for students with disabilities, and often serving as a primary contact for students seeking assistance. This brief underscores the significance of comprehensive onboarding and training for GAs in DROs, and presents the GA onboarding practices of one DRO at a mid-sized, budget-constrained, state university. A model is presented for employing paraprofessional GAs to alleviate some DRO staffing constraints, while ensuring quality service delivery for a growing population of students with disabilities. This model addresses both DRO staffing needs but also fosters the professional growth of GAs, thereby contributing to the field of postsecondary disability services. Insights suggest that well-structured training and supervision can lead to positive outcomes for both students receiving services and GAs themselves, suggesting the potential for replicating this model in similar institutional contexts.

Keywords: graduate assistant training, postsecondary disability resources, accommodations and services for students with disabilities, onboarding and supervision models, higher education staffing solutions

Graduate assistants (GAs) in disability resource offices (DROs) play a critical, frontline role in providing accommodations and services for students with disabilities. As legal requirements and student needs become more complex, DROs face significant challenges in delivering timely, individualized support. GAs are often tasked with fulfilling various roles within these offices, as part of internship or practicum requirements, part-time positions, or volunteer opportunities. While GAs may come with limited experience in postsecondary disability resources, they often bring enthusiasm and a strong desire to develop professional skills, making them valuable assets to DROs. However, for these experiences to benefit both DROs and GAs, the onboarding and training process must be thorough, deliberate, and evidence informed.

The challenges faced by DROs stem from the increasing demand for accommodations, rapid technological advancements, and the need to navigate complex legal and social justice issues. The field of postsecondary disability resources has experienced significant change, and has become increasingly

more complex. Because of this, Dukes et al. (2022) stress the importance of conducting periodic job analyses to better understand how DRO professionals' roles and functions have (and are) evolving. Since the last major job analysis efforts of the mid-to-late 1990s, postsecondary disability resources have had to adapt to substantial technological advancements, legislative changes, growth in distance education, hybrid instruction, and increased awareness of disability/social justice issues. The outcomes of biennial surveys conducted by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) reveal shifting job roles for DRO providers and the need for professionals to acquire ongoing technical skills, expanded content knowledge, and increased professional judgment (Scott & Marchetti, 2021). Experiencing budget and staffing shortages, GAs are often seen as a solution to meet these growing demands; and they can be, if they are adequately prepared. The growing complexities of the field underscore the importance of training GAs with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support students with disabilities.

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This brief presents a model for training GAs in DROs that not only addresses these immediate staffing needs but also ensures GAs are equipped to manage the unique challenges of the disability services field. The model emphasizes comprehensive onboarding, experiential training, and ongoing professional development, providing a foundation for GAs to success and thrive in their roles.

Summary of Relevant Literature

There is an existing body of literature focused on supervising and onboarding/training new GAs in postsecondary student affairs and services offices. However, there is a relative scarcity of literature that centers more specifically on the supervision and onboarding of new GAs for DROs. While much of the existing literature on GA training in student affairs can be applied to DROs, the unique nature of disability services—particularly the legal and social justice dimensions—necessitates a tailored approach.

Comprehensive and Experiential Training

Lebanc (2010) underscores the significance of intentionally providing GAs with a comprehensive approach to onboarding. For DROs, such training of GAs should encompass a variety of crucial topics, including medical and psycho-social aspects of disability, relevant legislation, accommodation strategies, and assistive technologies. Kranzow and Jacob (2018) recommend integrating theoretical frameworks into training, such as the social model of disability or person-centered approaches. Cooper et al. (2016) advocate for the inclusion of practical experiences and hands-on training. This method of experiential learning enables GAs to immediately apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of assisting students (Bailey et al., 2022; Shupp & Bloomford, 2023; Strimel et al., 2023).

Role Clarity and Expectations

The onboarding of GAs should prioritize the clear definition and communication of their role(s), as well as their office supervisors' and other permanent staff members' expectations, as this clarity can help to enhance their job performance, satisfaction, and retention (Bailey et al., 2022; Samuda Byard, 2016; Shupp & Bloomford, 2023; Strimel et al., 2023; Young, 2019). Clearly defined roles, expectations, and regular feedback allow new GAs to better understand and mature into their specific professional responsibilities and purpose within the office (Manne, 2008; Shupp & Arminio, 2012).

Socialization to Office and Institutional Culture

The onboarding phase is a crucial time to begin integrating new GAs into the office and the larger institutional culture (Bailey et al., 2022; Shupp & Arminio, 2012) through assisting them to network, build professional relationships, and develop institutional cultural competence (Strimel et al., 2023; White & Nonnameker, 2011). Professional socialization efforts can help foster a sense of belonging and professional identity for GAs (Romsa & Romsa, 2016; Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Socialization efforts might include introducing GAs to office and institutional policies and procedures that impact students with disabilities, as well as involving them in the office's ongoing efforts to address accessibility challenges on campus. Meetings with key institutional stakeholders, such as academic advisors, counseling services, and IT staff, can support their understanding of the interconnectedness of various campus services.

Mentorships

Assigning an office mentor to a new GA can be a helpful practice to aid in professional development and introduction to the field of postsecondary disability resources. Mentorship programs can provide valuable support during the initial transition phase. Such efforts help GAs navigate their new office responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2022, Shupp & Arminio, 2012), and foster a sense of belonging, and supporting GAs as they adapt to both the office and institutional culture (Strimel et al., 2023).

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

GA onboarding should adopt a collaborative and cross-disciplinary approach, proactively introducing new GAs to various functional areas within student affairs and other university services, promoting cross-disciplinary cooperation and understanding (Asai et al., 2001; Bailey et al., 2022; Janosik et al., 2015). This type of collaborative approach enables GAs to gain insights from a variety of perspectives and develop a more comprehensive understanding of postsecondary disability resources, student services in general, and the institution (Strimel et al., 2023).

Diversity and Inclusivity

Onboarding for new GAs should prioritize multicultural competence and inclusivity. Education and training on creating an inclusive environment is essential in student affairs (Strimel et al., 2023; White & Nonnameker, 2011). Training on multicultural sensitivity equips GAs to navigate diversity and thus aids the DRO and institution in creating a more inclusive environment (Bailey et al., 2022; White & Nonname-

ker, 2011). Intentional practices, such as inclusive language and diverse hiring, foster multicultural collaboration (Barham & Winston, 2006). Exposure to different functional areas within the institution can help GAs to develop a more comprehensive understanding of diverse student needs (Manne, 2008; Shupp & Bloomford, 2023).

Continuous Professional Development and Networking

Onboarding new GAs should prioritize life-long professional development and networking. By providing access to relevant resources, workshops or conferences, and encouraging participation in professional associations and networking opportunities, DROs can support GAs' continuous professional growth, now and throughout their future careers. Access to resources such as research articles, books, and online databases can empower GAs to stay updated with best practices and emerging trends (Lebanc, 2010; Strimel et al., 2023). Workshops and conferences expose GAs to a broader professional network and enhance their understanding of the field (Shupp & Bloomford, 2023; Williams & Davis, 2021). Joining professional associations focused on postsecondary disability resources and student affairs in general provides access to supportive communities, networking opportunities, and resources for growth (Bailey et al., 2022; Barham & Winston, 2006). Networking with colleagues and professionals in the field can also foster mentoring relationships and knowledge exchange (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Strimel et al., 2023).

Evaluation and Feedback

The onboarding process for new GAs should incorporate regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms to foster continuous improvement. Regular evaluation allows for the assessment of the onboarding/training process and the identification of areas for improvement (Bailey et al., 2022; Bourke, 2016). Constructive feedback plays a vital role in the professional growth and development of GAs, enhancing their performance and job satisfaction (Strimel et al., 2023; Young, 2019). Recognition of achievements reinforces their value and dedication to the office (Shupp & Bloomford, 2023; White & Nonnameker, 2011). Peer feedback creates a collaborative learning environment and improves the overall quality of the onboarding process (Bailey et al., 2022; Tull, 2006).

Setting Demographics

The present study was conducted at a mid-sized, financially stressed, middle Atlantic, state university,

with multiple campuses. At the time of this writing, the DRO serves more than 1,100 registered students with disabilities. The university is classified as R-2, ranging from dual-enrollment to clock hour (e.g., culinary, police, EMT training programs) to students in traditional liberal-arts undergraduate and graduate programs (master's and doctoral). The student population age ranges from high school (dual enrollment) to nontraditional students in their 60s. The types of disabilities represented in the service population has changed over the past five years, with over 43% of registrants identifying psychological disability, followed by ADHD (20%) and learning disability (16%); medical (12%), autism (3% and growing), hearing and vision (2%), and mobility (2%). The increase in hidden disabilities and those characterized by changeability, the demand for more intensive accommodation, an increase in the interactive process, and the loss of a clerical employee (leaving only two full-time faculty for the 1,100+ students) necessitated the use of paraprofessional GAs. For this study, paraprofessional GAs are those entering human service fields such as student affairs in higher education, educational psychology, or psychology.

Description of the Problem

At this mid-sized, financially limited, middle-Atlantic university, the DRO was established as part of a larger department that included academic advising, new student orientation, and career exploration services. However, for more than eight years, the DRO has been a stand-alone office. This DRO has historically been understaffed professionally for the number of students served and for the access and advising model employed.

Appropriate staffing is essential to meet program and university goals. Beyond the mission of access, there is a focus on education for the campus and success for students. Achievement of these objectives—and the labor-intensive interactive process—requires adequate staffing and supervision of staff. AHEAD notes the importance of staffing and operations in Program Domains, Standards, and Performance Indicators, Domains 4 and 5, specifically in Domain 4.1.5, *Develop a staffing plan appropriate to achieving the mission and advocate for its implementation*, Domain 5.1.1 *Provide orientation to new staff*, and Domain 5.1.2, *Determine professional development needs of staff members on an individual basis, including disability, access, technical, executive, and leadership knowledge and skills*.

The original, larger department was created with the intention of using paraprofessional GAs in sig-

nificant roles. A 1988 study by Winston and Ender reported the existence of at least one paraprofessional program in 72% of student affairs divisions surveyed. Ender and Wintson (1988) indicated that, while most respondents cited the use of paraprofessionals in residence halls and orientation, over one third noted their use in counseling centers and academic advising. While the most appropriate staffing for a DRO would be long-standing professionals, fully trained in the ethical, legal, and technical components of access assurance, the role of paraprofessionals is consistent with access services. Indeed, Ender and Wintson's (1988) survey revealed that the roles and tasks the paraprofessionals typically performed are consistent with components of the access adviser: provide information (92%), explain policies and procedures (79%), make referrals to other campus/community agencies (60%), collect data (46%), provide academic advice, provide study skills instruction (33%).

Even with the use of paraprofessional GAs, adequate staffing was a problem throughout its time as a larger comprehensive advising department and was accelerated when disability resource services were spun off as a separate entity during a university reorganization. Despite a five-year review indicating a need for increased faculty disability advisers, the spin-off led to decreased staffing and a loss of professional and clerical staff, as well as budget. Recognizing the vital importance that student needs be met by enough staff to address their needs, the paraprofessional GA model previously employed became more imperative, as did the need to modify training and supervision.

GAs come to the DRO in one of two ways—through direct hire or through assignment (sponsorship) by an academic department with which the DRO has a long-standing relationship. Direct hire allows for initial assessment, though cursory, of candidates and, within that, a mini assessment of whether the candidate's style can mesh with the supervisor's. Assignments by the external department provide unique challenges as the GAs may have no relation to the department or its mission or ethos.

GA training has always been part of the department's ethos. Although the department has now evolved away from the multi-function focus to that of specifically disability access, the staffing by paraprofessional GAs and their intensive training have remained. Despite the challenges of the mixed hiring model, this DRO has met the training needs of each through the "andrological approach." That is, a learner-centered approach that focuses on "fostering self-actualization, gaining experience, and problem-solving" (Perkins & Herring, 2021, p.77)

With the advent of an increased paraprofessional GA staff, and with no formal credit-bearing training option available, this DRO decided that the benefits of employing a GA advising staff outweighed the costs and therefore developed and now trains new GAs with an intensive, two-day introduction, followed by simulations and role-playing activities. This training, typically held before a semester begins, in the week or so before a new GA officially begins work, is then augmented by weekly meetings, discussions at staff weekly meetings, and with on-call, instantaneous, real-time training, and direction.

Description of the Practice

Each new GA is provided with a training binder composed of the several components. The most important component is a guide to client meetings, including goals and expectations, terminology, support agencies, what to do before, during, and after a meeting, document creation and tracking, documentation, accommodation plans, and support after the first meeting and throughout the semester. This section also includes a weekly plan of action and a more holistic semester plan of action, as well as a detailed description of how to approach writing an accommodation plan, what should be addressed with the plan, and a document identifying common functional limitations common of 46 disabilities or classes of disabilities. Training emphasizes that these documents provide guidance to be supplemented with the student's history of accommodations and stated current needs. In addition to the guide, the training binder also includes the following: (a) samples of all office forms; (b) available state vocational rehabilitation services; (c) 504 and ADA legislation and information; (d) sample assessments; (e) study skills and time management information; (f) data about learning disabilities, including ADHD; (g) adaptive technology and apps; and (h) articles about disabilities.

Two half-day training sessions focus on instruction and role-play of initial meetings with students, instructor-led simulations, trainee responses, and questions. Links to this DRO's resources and files, as well as sample communications, are provided and reviewed. Trainees are provided the sample assessments and other documentation and develop sample accommodation plans that are then reviewed by the trainer, to prepare GAs for having to develop plans during the semesters. Initial training for each graduate adviser is augmented by weekly, individual supervisory meetings with the director as well as the availability of real-time interventional meetings with the director or assistant director as concerns arise.

Student concerns are also discussed at weekly departmental faculty/staff meetings. All accommodation plans made by graduate advisers are reviewed and approved by their department supervisor.

During weekly meetings, supervision is both set and fluid in nature. Each week, the GA updates the director (supervisor) about their individual meetings with students for the past week. That discussion focuses on student issues and actions taken, and the director provides specific feedback for each situation. The remainder of the supervision may focus on the GA's career growth, personal concerns, or literature in the field, which allows the supervisor to fully know their GAs as well as remain current on student access needs. Descriptions of meeting content allow the supervisor to identify if there are concerns that a less experienced adviser may not have identified and allows for interception of problems before they become too significant. All advisers (including GAs) maintain case notes that are viewable by the two DRO faculty supervisors. GAs escalate any contentious or confusing situations to the supervisor for the supervisor to deem the need to intervene and, if needed, by whom the intervention will occur.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Students Receiving Service

DRO served students receive the name of their disability access adviser each semester. They fully embrace their part-time GA advisers and communicate no differently with them than if their advisor is a full-time faculty access adviser. Students willingly transition from the part-time GA adviser during the academic year to one of the full-time faculty advisers during the summer and back in the next regular semester. Some students do express a desire for a permanent faculty, as opposed to a GA advisor who is typically with the DRO for only two years. However, it is common for the supervisor to receive positive feedback from students (and their parents) about GA advisers.

Faculty Members

Faculty members at this institution, and associate deans/administrators, overall, embrace communication with this DRO's paraprofessional GA advisers. They are aware that they may ask questions of the supervisors. The use of paraprofessional GA staff is a component of DRO faculty and other department training. Associate deans, who are responsible for advising concerns, frequently commend the department's GA advisers to the director.

Paraprofessional GA Advisers

When asked by email and in person about their experience and its merits, GAs consistently mention the positive impact on their growth and development, with anecdotal comments such as the following: "I found my time...valuable in gaining practical experience related to multiple domains of the NASP Practice Model"; "My graduate assistantship with [the DRO] has prepared me for my career"; "Throughout my graduate assistantship, I had the opportunity to work with students one-on-one to develop advising skills, provide resources, and understand student-professional relationships. I was also fortunate enough to develop action plans and other educational plans to help aid in student performance"; "The professionalism, organizational, and advocacy skills I was able to develop as a result are still with me today. I learned about the importance of teamwork in facilitating student success, how to approach tough conversations with grace and empathy, and how to successfully manage an on-line calendar"; An anecdotal measure of their success is seen also in the assignment by a related academic department graduate of GA's to the DRO for over 20 years at no cost and seeking of practical experiences for graduate students by another graduate department.

Implications and Transferability

While initial training of GAs is both time and labor intensive, the use of paraprofessional GAs as full-scale disability access advisers still frees the full-time professional staff to focus on smaller caseloads of students. This model of service provision and supervision also benefits supervisees. Socialization into the [student affairs] profession is inherently connected to graduate education and especially linked to supervised practice experiences such as graduate assistantships, internships, or practicums. (Williams & Davis, 2021). Being intentional and dedicating time and resources to quality supervision in graduate education, reinforcing these skills in early career training spaces and across campuses, and then allowing new paraprofessionals to practice through observation and feedback loops are an integral way to improve and sustain positive supervision praxis (Williams & Davis, 2021).

A measure of success is seen not just in student retention (in 2023 the department achieved only 10% service population attrition from fall to spring semesters) but also in former GA advisers' comments, and in the choice by several former GA advisers to embark on a career path that continues in some form to ensure access for disabled persons. Despite no initial plans to embark on a career in postsecondary disability re-

sources, approximately 10% of the former GAs from a higher education training program have gone into the field and the remainder have noted increased awareness of access needs and effecting change at their workplace, despite that not being their official role.

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