



Improving the Oshkosh Placement Exchange (OPE) Experience: A Call for Collaboration Between Student Affairs and Higher Education/Student Affairs Faculty

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THE OSHKOSH PLACEMENT EXCHANGE (OPE) has been a staple in the recruitment and hiring of graduate assistants in student affairs for more than 40 years. While the graduate assistant position is invaluable in the development of future student affairs professionals, graduate programs in higher education and student affairs (HESA) play an equally important role in this professional preparation. Historically, only student affairs professionals have attended the OPE conference to hire new staff for their departments, but we believe there is also a benefit in involving HESA faculty in the recruitment process. To explore this assertion, HESA faculty and student affairs developed an innovative partnership for recruitment at OPE. This article provides a model for this collaboration and shares the perspectives of those who participated in this event.

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Each spring, aspiring student affairs professionals make the trek to Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Despite the frigid temperatures, they go in hopes of advancing their career in the field, participating in multiple interviews over several days at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange (OPE). Their ultimate goal: to secure an entry-level job or a graduate assistantship at one of the nearly 120 institutions that regularly attend the hiring conference (OPE, n.d.). According to the chair of the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, M. Nylen (personal communication, August 30, 2021), OPE has been a staple in the student affairs hiring circuit since 1979 and was originally geared toward hiring entry-level residence life professionals at institutions primarily in the Midwest. Sharing its historical context, Nylen indicated that over the years the OPE conference has expanded to include participants and institutions from all over the United States. It encompasses all functional areas within student affairs, not just those in housing and residence life. Additionally, OPE now serves as a conduit for professional placement and provides a place for those looking for degree programs in student affairs and the graduate assistantship that often comes with it.

As OPE continues to expand and grow beyond job placement and into the realm of professional preparation, it makes sense that faculty within higher education/student affairs (HESA) graduate programs become more involved in the process. An undertaking of this size and scope requires careful planning and ongoing communication by the OPE conference staff and both the institutions and candidates participating in the interview process. Those candidates looking at graduate assistantships have to consider not only the job, but also the graduate program. Though the Oshkosh Placement Exchange does not track faculty attendance, anecdotal observation at the conference

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supports the assertion that the majority of employers conducting interviews are student affairs professionals and, rarely if at all, include HESA faculty who can speak to the graduate preparation provided by their respective coursework. While candidates can ask questions about their potential new employer, those seeking graduate assistantships and/or professional preparation from the HESA program are limited in what they can learn about these opportunities from employers who cannot speak to it firsthand. Subsequently, these candidates only get half the information they need to make an informed decision about this critical first step into the student affairs profession. Quality graduate preparation is essential to student affairs professionals' success and socialization in the profession (Liddell et al., 2014).

Acknowledging the impact that faculty and student affairs supervisors can have in recruiting graduate students, HESA program directors and student affairs professionals should work collaboratively. To effectively prepare new practitioners to succeed in student affairs work requires classroom instruction and supervised practice or graduate assistantship experience (Janosik et al., 2014). Therefore, it is in the best interest of faculty and practitioners to work together to recruit and select the best candidates. However, these processes are not often concurrent; student affairs departments often wait for graduate preparatory programs to provide a list of students they wish to enroll as potential candidates for their assistantships. The challenge in this method is that academic abilities and practical application of that knowledge may not always align with the desired level of success. Herdlein and colleagues (2010) recommend that "as scholars and practitioners have come together periodically to help define the philosophical direction of the field, it may be prudent for critical segments of student affairs administration to initiate similar discussions on the direction of preparation programs" (p. 43). There is a need to create a synergistic relationship between HESA faculty and student affairs where there is a shared responsibility to recruit and select graduate students for concurrent enrollment in preparatory programs and placement in a student affairs assistantship. As Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) stated, graduate preparation programs should be considered the first step in "the beginning of a life-long process of professional learning and development" (p. 333). With the academic program absent from the interview process, OPE candidates are not getting the full picture of their experience as a graduate assistant (GA). However, this does not have to be the case.

Imagine if the assistantship site (i.e., residence life professional staff) and the HESA program/faculty were *both* represented in the interview, working collaboratively to recruit the best possible employees. Having an opportunity to get information and ask questions about the position's professional and academic aspects would provide a more complete picture for candidates. This simple revelation was the impetus for developing an innovative practice to jointly foster collaboration between student affairs and

academic affairs to recruit graduate assistants at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange. To elaborate more on this venture, this article was co-authored by those who participated in this initiative: HESA faculty members, residence life professional staff, a graduate student who interviewed at OPE, and the OPE conference staff. We hope that in sharing our varied perspectives on this partnership, including a pilot program that illustrates the benefits of collaboration, future participants in OPE and similar placement venues will consider the benefits and potential opportunities of similar collaborations between student affairs and HESA faculty.

OVERVIEW OF HESA PROGRAMS AND STUDENT AFFAIRS RECRUITMENT

To better understand the collaboration we developed to recruit graduate students at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, it is necessary to provide the context and background of HESA programs and the recruitment of student affairs professionals through such hiring conferences.

HESA Programs

The traditional route for training in student affairs typically includes a graduate degree from one of the approximately 230 higher education/student affairs graduate preparation programs in the United States (Calhoun et al., 2020). The professional preparation provided by these programs plays a central role in the development and professional identity of student affairs professionals and college administrators (Creamer et al., 2001; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). According to Cuyjet and colleagues (2009), “College student personnel graduates needed to learn a wide range of skills, including those related to counseling and administration, if they were to be effective in their chosen profession” (p. 104). Each program has the freedom to set its curriculum, but most HESA programs are guided, at least in part, by the 10 competency areas outlined by ACPA: College Student Educators International and NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), as supported in recommendations provided by CAS: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (Creamer & Winston, 2002; Young & Janosik, 2007). The competencies are categorized into three proficiency levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced) and help define the skills and qualities needed to be an effective college administrator. Beginning with its roots in the early 20th century and continuing today, the student affairs field continues to evolve and grow to meet the challenges of higher education and the needs students have outside of the classroom.

Recruitment of Student Affairs Professionals

Tull (2011) posited that “recruitment and selection processes are some of the most crucial of the staff practice functions” (p. 126). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on the recruitment and selection processes of graduate students and/or graduate assistants. However, understanding that investing time, energy, and resources into graduate students will impact the future of student affairs, it is easy to translate professional staff recruitment and selection practices to recruiting graduate assistants. Once academic

and student affairs align their values, it is important to think critically about who will be involved in the selection process. For professional staff, various stakeholders make up committees that guide the search process, often on behalf of the hiring manager. The same process should exist when recruiting and selecting graduate students. Winston and Creamer (1997) acknowledged the importance of a holistic approach to staff selection, stating that, when establishing search committees, “care should be taken in their composition to ensure that critical constituencies are represented in the committee” (pp. 144–145). Through this logic, one would think that the stakeholders involved in the graduate assistant search process should include both HESA faculty and student affairs supervisors. It would also be beneficial to include current students who serve in assistantships. This collective perspective from staff, faculty, and students on the assistantship and academic experience will provide vital insight to candidates.

At this transformative early stage in their career development, incoming graduate students with potential faculty, supervisors, and classmates engaged in their interviews and recruitment will benefit from a sense of holistic support that one might not infer from a singular, one-on-one interview. Through a connected recruitment and selection process, “graduate preparation faculty can support the development of accurate perceptions by exploring the influence of institutional type, while supervisors can inform prospective employees of the nature of the work at their institutions” (Davidson, 2012, p. 89). This intentional and visible movement toward collaboration between practitioners and faculty from the start of the hiring process will enhance the experience for graduate students (Haley et al., 2011). This connection is only the beginning. By continuing this partnership and “designing learning-oriented assistantships and tightening the classroom-workplace connection, students will come to more fully comprehend theory-to-practice experiences, resulting in the development of a credible, professional identity” (Haley et al., 2011, pp. 15–16).

PROPOSED MODEL FOR FACULTY/STAFF COLLABORATION AT THE OSHKOSH PLACEMENT EXCHANGE

There is a clear need and opportunity for greater collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs (Levy & Polnariiev, 2016; Nesheim et al., 2007). Our academic and student affairs communities are often described as isolated in silos and lacking meaningful interaction outside the respective division. Collaboration has power and can yield a symbiotic relationship that benefits everyone, including the students. With this in mind, HESA faculty and student affairs professionals took the opportunity to develop an innovative collaborative partnership for recruitment at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange (see Figure 1, page 51). This recruitment conference has historically been attended exclusively by student affairs professionals (primarily within residence life) to

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recruit graduate assistants and full-time professionals for college administrator positions. There is strong attendance at the annual hiring conference, with employers and colleges typically recruiting more than 100 potential candidates each year, with 500+ candidates in attendance (OPE, n.d.).

FIGURE 1

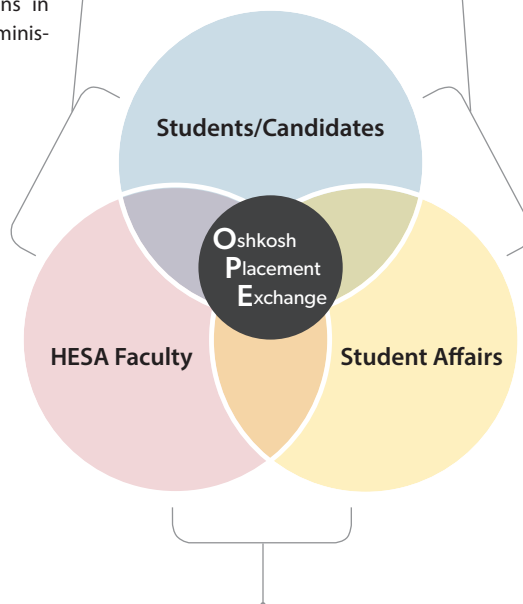
Student Affairs Professionals and HESA Faculty Collaboration at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange

Faculty & Student Interaction

Program faculty have the opportunity to speak with the students about the curriculum, the background of the HESA program faculty, and resources afforded by the HESA program to help develop the student academically for positions in higher education administration.

S.A. Staff & Student Interaction

Residence life professionals have the opportunity to speak with students about the responsibilities of the GA position, professional development provided by the department, and the opportunities afforded by the graduate assistantship to help prepare the student to become a student affairs professional and hold leadership positions in higher education administration.



Faculty & Staff Interaction

Breaking down the "silos," this collaboration gives faculty and staff the opportunity to work together on recruitment—which ultimately benefits both areas. Furthermore, it fosters relationships which can lead to additional collaborative efforts.

GA recruitment by student affairs departments at hiring conferences like OPE is one of the greatest strengths of our profession.

In developing our model, we felt that student affairs and HESA faculty needed to work together at each step in the recruitment process. Conversations would start early in the year about the qualities we were looking for in potential candidates and logistically what a shared recruitment process would look like. We felt it was important not only to work together in the planning and implementation but also to be open with candidates about the level of collaboration. A united front would not only allow us to be on the same page with those being recruited, but would also show the candidates firsthand the benefits of attending an institution where this type of collaboration is valued. Once we agreed to this strategy, it was time to implement it during the next recruitment cycle.

IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATION AT THE OSHKOSH PLACEMENT EXCHANGE (PILOT TESTING)

This partnership between HESA faculty and residence life began in the early fall semester with the agreement and commitment to jointly recruit at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange. The Department of Residence Life coordinated the GA recruitment process as they had previously done. This included completing the OPE job postings, screening candidates, and contacting selected candidates to schedule interviews at the OPE conference. Before attending the conference in March, the Department of Residence Life and HESA faculty communicated with candidates, letting them know they would have two interviews as part of their selection process: one with the student affairs professionals and the second with the HESA faculty. That communication included a request for candidates to send their unofficial academic transcripts to the HESA faculty before their interview at OPE.

At the conference, candidates were scheduled for a 60-minute interview. The first 30 minutes of the interview were conducted in one room with the student affairs professionals. Here, students would learn more about the GA role, the specific job responsibilities, and the department's culture. Following that interview, the students rotated into an adjoining interview room for time with a HESA faculty member. During the conversation with faculty, students would learn more about the institution, the HESA program, and the professional development opportunities (in and outside the classroom) available if they chose to attend the school. This interview also allowed the faculty member time to get to know the candidate, which, combined with a review of transcripts, allowed them to quickly ascertain if the candidate met the established HESA program admissions criteria.

Following the interviews, the student affairs professionals and HESA faculty discussed the strengths and challenges of each candidate; through those conversations, the HESA faculty member identified any students who did not meet the academic ex-

expectations for admission, which allowed them to be removed from consideration. From there, the student affairs professionals identified their top candidates to offer graduate assistant positions. The HESA faculty member then carefully re-reviewed their materials, including transcripts, to make a tentative decision about whether or not they would be admitted into the program. This process mirrors the typical admission process for the program, with the interview providing the information typically gleaned from the additional application materials. Assuming that the student's academic record met the minimum requirements, the faculty member should easily be able to determine through their conversation if the candidate meets the requirements for experience (typically reflected in a personal statement and résumé). These candidates were then offered the position by residence life with the understanding that they were being conditionally admitted into the HESA program pending academic verification of official transcripts and background checks via the graduate school admission process.

Once candidates formally accepted the graduate assistant position, the Department of Residence Life coordinated their hiring process as a GA with human resources. At the same time, the HESA faculty member worked with the student to complete the graduate school application and gain eventual acceptance into the program. Up to this point, collaboration focused on the recruitment, placement, and enrollment of the student into the GA position. Moving forward, the collaboration focused on providing ongoing support to help these students in and out of the classroom. This partnership included professional development sessions led by the faculty, invitations for practitioners to serve as guest speakers and practicum hosts, and mock interviews to prepare students for the job search.

DISCUSSION

GA recruitment by student affairs departments at hiring conferences like OPE is one of the greatest strengths of our profession. This recruitment has evolved into a multifaceted process that provides candidates with an abundance of information about the environment and culture of the respective institution and the ability to speak with layers of staff and students throughout the recruitment and interview process. Arguably, this gives them a realistic understanding of the position's responsibilities, the institution and its culture, and what their professional experience and development in that role would look like. However, this insight is often limited exclusively to the role of the position and not inclusive of the graduate preparatory program. This is a significant shortcoming, as we have illustrated that the GA position and HESA program are inextricably linked and have an equally important role in the professional preparation of these student affairs professionals.

This level of communication and collaboration . . . helped show those GAs recruited at OPE that the relationships they saw during their interviews were real and ongoing, not just a talking point for the hiring process.

Having identified this challenge, we created a partnership between student affairs and the HESA program to attend and recruit together at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange. As expected, partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs have significant and impactful outcomes for students (Levy & Polnariev, 2016; Nesheim et al., 2007). From the faculty perspective, this partnership proved successful on many levels. To begin with, it further solidified a working partnership between the division of student affairs and the HESA program in terms of recruitment and ongoing collaboration throughout the academic year. It was the needed impetus to begin intentional conversations between the faculty and student affairs professionals about how to best develop the GAs both in and out of the classroom. The faculty could share with the student affairs departments and GA supervisors what students were learning in the classroom and what they struggled to grasp academically and conceptually. This allowed the supervisors to challenge them to apply theory-to-practice in their GA positions by applying what they learned in the classroom. This level of communication and collaboration also helped show those GAs recruited at OPE that the relationships they saw during their interviews were real and ongoing, not just a talking point for the hiring process.

The student affairs professionals and GA supervisors were also able to share some of the professional shortcomings of the GAs so faculty could build those areas into the curriculum and address them immediately within current courses. Though the silos separating faculty and student affairs professionals are often discussed (Frost et al., 2010; Kezar, 2003; Syno et al., 2019), researchers have provided little direction on how to meaningfully address breaking down this divide. Our established collaboration between academic and student affairs shows one way to address this divide. Kezar (2003) noted that larger institutions "may need to rely less on leadership and need to focus more on planning and restructuring" (p. 154). Subsequently, the success of this collaboration was arguably attributed to grassroots planning by the faculty and student affairs professionals and stemmed from a series of conversations rather than a formal directive from the leadership to develop such a partnership.

By developing a shared understanding of the transitional needs of graduate students, faculty and practitioners can jointly develop a support system to help guide them successfully through their graduate programs and assistantships. Tolman and Calhoun (2019) described this as a symbiotic relationship, in which not only the student feels supported, but also the faculty and administrators, who feel upheld and validated in their goals of educating and developing future professionals. This intentional collaboration should begin with the decision to develop a more succinct theory-to-practice connection through integrated experiences (Haley et al., 2011). Once there is an understanding that learning will occur both in and out of the classroom, from both faculty and practitioners, conversations can begin about the type of candidates who will best fit both the academic program and the assistantship. The effort to align graduate recruitment and assistantships by strengthening the partner-

Engaging with potential faculty, supervisory staff, and colleagues at OPE gives students a better understanding of the full support they can expect to receive.

ship between graduate preparatory programs and student affairs departments may help slow the overwhelming attrition rate in the profession and, in turn, may have a ripple effect on the recruitment, retention, and development of student affairs professionals (Dickerson et al., 2011).

There is a shared responsibility between the student affairs professionals who serve as the supervisors of the graduate assistants and the HESA faculty who challenge and support these students in the classroom. With that being said, great demands are placed upon students as they navigate a split identity of being a graduate assistant and a full-time HESA graduate student. It is unsurprising that graduate students face a great deal of stress as they balance the demands of the graduate program and the assistantship (Grady et al., 2014). Having faculty and practitioners partner in interviewing candidates at the OPE conference allows for greater transparency about expectations (of both the program and assistantship) early in the search process. It allows the candidate to have a more realistic understanding of the stresses they will endure *before* beginning the program.

The most important outcome of these recruitment conferences is helping students find the right graduate assistant position and HESA program. Although we would love to see enrollment in our graduate programs increase and to secure excellent candidates to assume GA positions, this cannot come at the expense of a student's professional development and growth. There must be a commitment from the field of student affairs to help new professionals identify where they will flourish when they begin their careers. To that end, we firmly believe that partnerships like this can better help students identify the right positions and programs and, in turn, further strengthen the profession.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE AND HIGHER EDUCATION/STUDENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

Graduate assistants encounter multiple sources of stress and challenges at critical points in their professional careers. The expectations imposed on them during their master's program are extensive, but adding an assistantship to this two-year experience, although valuable, adds a myriad of new stressors in their daily lives. Graduate students who anticipate the demands of both identities, student and graduate assistant, are arguably most prepared to navigate the dual experiences successfully. We believe that the collaborations created via our pilot program can help provide the kind of holistic support that new professionals need at the beginning of their professional journey. Engaging with potential faculty, supervisory staff, and colleagues at OPE gives students a better understanding of the full support they can expect to receive.

There are great benefits for HESA graduate programs and their faculty to collaborate with student affairs at recruitment conferences like the Oshkosh Placement Exchange. From a HESA program perspective, this partnership can turn a limited program with only students from that respective state into a national program overnight. For example, recruiting five GAs from the Oshkosh Placement Exchange in a given year yielded students from California, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Florida to a program with only students from that institution's state. Beyond the obvious benefits of diversifying the student population, which adds new perspectives to class conversations, this expansion also serves as a recruitment tool for the HESA program and the university as a whole. The positive experience that GAs have in their program and assistantship will encourage many to remain at that institution and accept professional positions as they continue in their careers beyond their graduate assistantship. This retention and conversion of GAs into professional positions can reduce the number of staff that needs to be recruited each year, thus decreasing the time and resources it takes to recruit and train new staff and contributing to an institutional culture that retains and promotes from within. For the GAs that choose to move on to other student affairs positions throughout the country and internationally, their positive experiences at this institution will (hopefully) lead them to recommend that others consider that university as a place to work or pursue their degree. As a result, this collaboration has long-term benefits for the institution.

Equally important, this collaboration provides an impetus to develop a mutually beneficial partnership between student affairs and academic affairs, which helps break down the silos that separate them. From the HESA program perspective, this partnership is critical as it allows faculty to have direct lines of communication with student affairs professionals to learn of the trends they see in practice that can be addressed within the classroom, seek out guest speakers, explore internship and practicum opportunities, identify areas for research within student affairs, and recruit student affairs professionals as collaborators. For those students who will become future leaders in the field, seeing the benefits of successful collaboration between academic and student affairs will push them to build similar relationships as they move up the ranks.

HESA faculty and student affairs professionals should strive to develop a partnership like this to market Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs in higher education and student affairs. These doctoral programs would be a selling point to mid-level and senior-level applicants recruited at conferences like NASPA's The Placement Exchange (TPE). The ability to market a doctoral program at these conferences would be a selling point that would attract the interest of many candidates. As budgets for salaries and fringe benefits become tighter across the higher education profession, marketing the tuition remission benefits of a desired doctoral program for candidates would be a low-cost strategy to recruit and retain employees in the face of shrinking salaries and budgets (Tolman, 2018).

Collaboration has power and can yield a symbiotic relationship that benefits everyone, including the students.

There is a shared responsibility between the student affairs professionals who serve as the supervisors of the graduate assistants and the HESA faculty who challenge and support these students in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Our initial success in this collaboration between HESA faculty and student affairs professionals to recruit graduate assistants warrants further attention and empirical research. Research should examine the students who participated in the recruitment and the faculty/staff who collaborated in this hiring process. A qualitative analysis would allow a better understanding of each participant's experiences and how the experience impacted them as a candidate seeking to begin their journey in the profession of student affairs. Additionally, a longitudinal quantitative study should be conducted to explore whether or not this collaboration impacted these graduate students' long-term retention, sense of belonging, and professional identity. This analysis will also allow us to determine if there are differences in the satisfaction, professional development, and overall recruitment of students who participated in this collaboration versus those who did not. We are very interested not only in the experiences of those involved in the collaboration, but also in the potential impact that collaboration may have had on the candidates' decision to attend the institution, as well as how it may have set up their expectations for these types of collaborations during their time in the field.

However, as this is a newly implemented initiative, a sample size for this type of analysis is simply too small. We hope disseminating this initiative through publication and conference presentations will increase interest and participation in this collaborative approach by hiring institutions at these recruitment conferences. Once the number of participants increases, this collaborative approach can be studied empirically, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This empirical research will provide insight into the benefits of this collaborative approach and potential ways to strengthen it moving forward.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the key role a graduate assistantship and HESA program can play in developing future student affairs professionals, those in the field need to help these individuals find the right environment. We believe that would be an institution that has graduate program faculty *and* assistantship supervisors working together to provide the theoretical and experiential scaffolding needed to propel their students into a successful career in higher education. The innovative partnership between HESA faculty and student affairs professionals that we have presented led to the successful recruitment of graduate students at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange. This collaboration gave student participants an accurate picture of their professional and academic experiences at the institution. In addition, by breaking down the silos between academic affairs and student affairs, the faculty and staff involved could agree on the best candidates for their respective positions.

This collaboration can be a model for other institutions to develop similar strategies to recruit graduate assistants into HESA programs. In addition, partnerships like these can be a tool for institutions to market their doctoral programs to mid- and senior-level professionals recruiting for upper administration roles. While these types of partnerships between HESA faculty and student affairs practitioners can benefit programs that attend recruitment venues like OPE, we believe it should lead to more intentional collaborations between these entities in all aspects of professional preparation. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you attend OPE or a similar process as an incoming graduate student?
How about as an interviewer for incoming graduate students? What was your experience?
2. What are your institution's processes for recruiting and hiring graduate assistants?
Does that process happen before or after the candidates are admitted to your institution's academic programs?
3. Does your institution offer student affairs graduate assistantships to students outside of the HESA (or equivalent) program? How might the changes proposed in this article impact those students?
4. How might the changes proposed in this article impact incoming students who cannot or do not attend OPE or a similar event?
5. How do you think the changes proposed in this article could impact incoming student affairs practitioners who did not take the traditional route mentioned in the article?

Discussion questions developed by Kayley Carter, Virginia Tech