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## LINKED LIVES: THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT AFFAIRS DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND THEIR PARTNERS

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	This study examines how higher education and student affairs doctoral students and their partners navigate the graduate school experience through the lens of linked lives.
Background	Enhancing doctoral students' ability to integrate their academic and personal lives can contribute to positive student outcomes such as retention and satisfaction. Yet, many features of graduate education may undermine students' ability to maintain their romantic relationships.
Methodology	This study draws from joint and individual interviewees with six couples (12 individuals), wherein one partner was a doctoral student in higher education or student affairs.
Contribution	Many studies examine work-life integration for faculty members, but much less research seeks to understand how academia affects the experiences of graduate students and their partners. This study contributes to the literature on graduate student work-life integration by putting couples at the center of analysis, using theories of linked lives, and considers implications for doctoral students and graduate training programs in higher education and student affairs.
Findings	Our findings revealed three main ways that doctoral students and their partners navigated graduate education: shared decision-making; negotiating,

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	turn-taking, and trading off; and strategically integrating or dividing academic and personal lives.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Graduate programs and institutions can enhance work-life integration and the experiences of doctoral students and their partners by incorporating discussion of dual-career concerns into the recruitment/admissions process and considering work-life concerns throughout the doctoral experience.
Recommendations for Researchers	Applying the theoretical framework of linked lives brings visibility to a layer of the graduate student experience previously made invisible: the role of student's partners.
Impact on Society	By recognizing the work-life experiences of higher education and student affairs doctoral students and their partners, this study challenges graduate training programs to consider how to change or enhance the resources and structures offered to graduate students in ways that contribute to satisfaction and retention.
Future Research	Longitudinal examination of doctoral students and their partners over time and comparison of experiences of couples in different fields/disciplines.
Keywords	graduate students, graduate education, work-life integration

## INTRODUCTION

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*“Why does graduate school kill so many marriages?”*

Doctoral student Wedemeyer-Strombel (2018) posed this question in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. In the article, the author described how features of graduate training – toxic cultures that demand overwork and the devaluing of personal obligations – can take a negative toll on doctoral students' long-term relationships. Wedemeyer-Strombel provides a warning: though her marriage ultimately survived, had she known that it would be the “collateral” put up to complete her degree, she would have thought twice before starting her doctoral journey.

In the last 20 years, researchers have paid much attention to work-life integration for faculty (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Lester, 2013b; O'Meara & Campbell, 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Yet, Wedemeyer-Strombel's (2018) article, and many comments from students that follow it, illustrate how academia's work-life integration problem impacts graduate students and their relationships with partners. While institutions increasingly devote attention to the social supports (e.g., faculty mentoring, peer relationships) doctoral students need to navigate the academic environment (Austin, 2002; Nettles & Millett, 2006; O'Meara, 2013; Taylor & Antony, 2000; Tompkins et al., 2016), few researchers examine the interactive and dynamic ways that graduate training shapes the experiences of graduate students and their partners and how these experience may influence graduate student success.

Understanding how graduate students and their partners navigate graduate education merits study for several reasons. There is a link between doctoral students' ability to integrate their work and lives and important outcomes such as retention (Brus, 2006; Golde, 2005; Mason et al., 2009, 2013; Stimpson & Filer, 2011) and program satisfaction (Tompkins et al., 2016). Promoting work-life integration fosters mental health and well-being (Kinman & Jones, 2008): issues that are increasingly more visible within the graduate student population (Evans et al., 2018). Thus, a study such as this may benefit graduate students and their partners by providing additional context about the doctoral experience as it is lived by both the student and the partner. Furthermore, graduate school is an important site of socialization (Brus, 2006; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2016) wherein students learn the norms and val-

ues of academia. Students who are able to better integrate their work and lives during graduate training may therefore develop the habits and perspectives needed to challenge and change academic cultures as future faculty members, academic leaders, and higher education/student affairs administrators. Examining how students and their partners navigate the graduate education experience will therefore help departments, graduate programs, and institutions better understand how to promote important student and organizational outcomes, while also giving insight into how to bring about change within higher education institutions.

With this background in mind, the purpose of this study was to understand how higher education and student affairs doctoral students and their partners navigate the graduate school experience together. Using the theory of linked lives, we sought to illuminate the internal and external forces that shape the experience of couples and the strategies that couples use. We draw from qualitative interviews with six couples wherein one partner was a higher education or student affairs doctoral student and the other partner was not currently a graduate student.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Only a handful of studies consider how graduate students manage aspects of their personal and professional lives. These studies typically focus on the experiences of graduate students with children (e.g., Kulp, 2019; Sallee, 2016) and find that graduate students with families often struggle to attain the work-life integration that they wish to achieve (Brus, 2006; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2016). Departments and advisors play a significant role in influencing graduate students' ability to integrate their work and lives (Campbell & O'Meara, 2014; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; Mason et al., 2009; O'Meara et al., 2013, 2014). For instance, faculty may signal the expectation that work should take precedence over personal obligations (Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; Mason et al., 2009). Departmental norms and expectations that students make themselves available at all times can undercut attempts at maintaining participation in personal lives (Sallee, 2016). Furthermore, institutional reforms aimed at creating more "work-life friendly" academic cultures often do not include graduate students (Lester, 2013a). Overall, lack of work-life integration serves as a deterrent to degree completion and the pursuit of academic careers, especially for women (Haynes et al., 2012; Kulp, 2019; Mason et al., 2013; Stimpson & Filer, 2011).

Though past work is helpful for identifying that work-life integration in general is a challenge for graduate students, fewer researchers consider how graduate students and their partners navigate graduate education. The graduate education experience (e.g., workload, competition, and the general academic environment) are known sources of stress for graduate students (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Rummell, 2015). Studies on relationships demonstrate the strong presence of work-to-life crossover, wherein the work stress of one partner can transfer to the other and influence both partners' relationship satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2009; Matthews et al., 2006). Graduate education can cause financial instability (Katz et al., 2000; MacLean & Peters, 1995), and financial strain is a major factor in relationship satisfaction (Dew, 2008; Papp et al., 2009). Graduate students may have less time to spend with their partners (Gonzalez et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2000; MacLean & Peters, 1995), thereby influencing emotional intimacy and relationship closeness. Graduate students may decide to relocate to pursue their degrees, which may require partners to find new jobs near the student's school or force the couple to live apart during graduate school (Clerge et al., 2017). Cumulatively, the decision to pursue a graduate degree can be viewed as a disruption to the family system (Brannock et al., 2000; Carter & McGoldrick, 2005; Gold, 2006), which impacts both students and their partners.

At the same time, graduate students who have partners may experience benefits from their relationship status. Graduate students experience high levels of isolation and loneliness (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Baker & Pifer, 2011), and thus having a partner may reduce or mitigate some of these feelings. As in studies of dual-career academic couples (e.g., Creamer, 2001; Yakaboski, 2016), students who have partners who are also pursuing graduate degrees may attain greater personal and academic satisfaction because their partner understands the demands associated with their scholarly pursuits. Students

with partners may experience greater financial stability compared to students who are single and may likewise find that because their “lives” (e.g., partners) outside of the academy are more visible, they can achieve greater balance (Martinez et al., 2013). In terms of academic outcomes, some researchers compared the academic outcomes of graduate students with and without partners and found that married/partnered students had higher persistence and were more likely to complete their degrees compared to single students (Lott et al., 2009; Price, 2006).

In all, research in this area suggests that graduate students and their partners may experience challenges in navigating graduate education, but also that there are benefits to having a partner during the graduate school journey. Still, there are gaps in the literature. Much of the work has been quantitative in nature (e.g., Mason et al., 2009) and focused on students, giving little insight into how graduate education has shaped couples’ experiences together. Similarly, many studies (e.g., Brannock et al., 2000; Gold, 2006) have been conducted by marriage and family researchers interested in making recommendations for counselors providing services to couples, rather than to the kinds of institutional policies and practices that influence couples’ experience. With these gaps in mind, we next discuss our guiding theoretical framework of linked lives.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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Our study is guided by theories of linked lives (Elder, 1994; Han & Moen, 1999; Moen & Sweet, 2002), a human development and life-course theory that examines the ways romantically partnered individuals live “mutually related and interdependent lives” (Elder, 1994, p. 6). This perspective argues that when individuals are in long-term partnerships, work lives and personal lives cannot be separated into distinct domains. Each member of a couple makes decisions about their professional life in consideration of their personal life, and vice versa (Han & Moen, 1999; Krüger & Lévy, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002).

Linked lives reveals how forces internal and external to couples can influence the personal and professional choices partners make and outcomes each partner experiences. Internal forces, such as how a couple coordinates domestic labor or determines whose career is the primary one, play a major role in influencing the outcomes of couples (Becker & Moen, 1999; Pixley & Moen, 2003; Rusconi & Solga, 2008). External forces, such as institutional structures, policies, and culture; labor market segregation; and social norms and role expectations, also shape the linked lives of couples (Krüger, 2009; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Rusconi & Solga, 2008). For example, traditional gender norms wherein women are expected to take on the majority of domestic and childrearing duties may influence the kinds of professional positions that women in heterosexual relationships take (Rusconi & Solga, 2008). Overall, each partner’s professional (e.g., professional satisfaction, advancement) and personal (e.g., marital satisfaction, happiness) outcomes are the result of “entwined” processes that operate at many interdependent levels (Rusconi & Solga, 2008).

A handful of studies use linked lives to examine the experience of couples employed within higher education contexts, though focus on faculty rather than graduate students (Ackers, 2004; Vohlídalová, 2014, 2017). Such work highlights aspects of the academic environment that shape the experiences of couples. For instance, studies show academic mobility, or the norm wherein academics are expected to move in order to advance, significantly impacts the experiences of dual-career academic couples (Vohlídalová, 2014, p. 98). Oftentimes, one partner made professional sacrifices in order to facilitate academic mobility for their partner (Vohlídalová, 2014). Such studies highlight the role of contexts (e.g., life stage, professional field norms/expectations) in understanding the linked lives of couples, but also emphasize the need to understand how early-career professionals (i.e., doctoral students and their partners) navigate these contexts.

## POSITIONALITY AND SCOPE

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As researchers and doctoral students, we, the authors, came to this study from the same institution, positioned in an academic department for higher education, student affairs, and international education policy at a large, public research university in the Mid-Atlantic. We all have partners of between four to five years. Each researcher lives with their partner and navigates the doctoral journey as individuals whose partners are not associated with higher education and student affairs. Thus, we came to this topic with assumptions and our own lived experiences about the influence of graduate training on our relationships.

In this study, we focused exclusively on participants who are also studying higher education and/or student affairs (HE/SA) as an academic field. There are 245 graduate programs in higher education and student affairs programs (Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], n.d.), mostly concentrated at large, public research institutions (ASHE, n.d.; Harris, 2007). Although many HE/SA programs are offered via traditional, in-person, cohort-based models (Bourke, 2007), institutions increasingly offer online delivery (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), institutions award approximately 600 doctoral degrees in HE/SA each year. Programs offer a mix of Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) and Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) degrees, which reflects the practitioner orientation of the field.

## METHODS

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### *RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND EPISTEMOLOGY*

With this background and theoretical framework in mind, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do higher education and student affairs doctoral students and their partners navigate graduate education together?
2. What internal and external forces shape their experience?
3. What strategies, if any, do they use to navigate graduate education as a couple?

As previously discussed, research shows that graduate students can face a myriad of challenges on their path to completing their degrees. Thus, *navigation* refers the processes in which graduate students and their partners make choices about graduate school and experience the challenges and triumphs associated with pursuing a graduate degree. Based on the theoretical framework of linked lives, this inquiry focuses on how doctoral and students experience graduate school together. Based on this theory, we expect that each partner's experiences are mutually shaped by the decision to pursue a graduate degree, regardless of whether they are the partner who is a student. We moreover assume, based on our theoretical framework, that a couple's relationship as a whole is influenced by the graduate training process.

Research questions were rooted in the constructivist epistemological assumption that there are multiple, complex realities (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative approaches for understanding the linked lives of doctoral students and their partners were therefore warranted to better understand participants' lived experience in navigating graduate education and the context that surrounds their navigation (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

### *DATA SOURCES AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT*

For this study, the authors drew from qualitative interviews conducted with six couples (12 individuals). Participants were recruited through social media, email, and through the authors' professional and personal networks. To be included in the study, participants needed to be in a two-person relationship ("couple") wherein at least one partner was currently enrolled as a doctoral student in higher

education or student affairs. Students could be enrolled in either a part-time or full-time basis. We used a broad definition of “relationship,” though required that participants identify as being in a committed, long-term relationship. The final sample included couples wherein one partner was currently enrolled in a higher education or student affairs doctoral program and the other partner was not currently pursuing a doctoral degree. Throughout the findings, the currently enrolled student participant is referred to as the “student” and the participant who was not currently enrolled as the “partner.”

Students were enrolled in six different U.S.-based institutions and had a range of pre-doctoral professional experiences (e.g., in student affairs or non-profits) and career goals (e.g., higher education administrator, faculty member). While not an intentional part of the participant recruitment strategy, almost all (five out of six) students were enrolled in their doctoral programs on a full-time basis (or had at one time been full-time students) and most students (five out of six) had relocated or would have relocated to pursue their doctoral degree. All students pursued Ph.Ds (not Ed.Ds). Thus, in many ways, participants in the sample were not the prototypical higher education scholar-practitioners pursuing degrees at the institutions where they worked.

Partners likewise ranged in professions and educational status, with some employed in the field of higher education, others in professional fields, and others full-time parents. Together, couples represented a range of relationship statuses. However, all couples expressed long-term commitment (average number of years in relationship was around 8). Participants represented a range of gender identities and sexual orientations, though were not diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, a noted limitation of the study. Each couple is described below.

### **Jesse and Oliver**

Student Jesse and partner Oliver self-identify as male, white, and gay. They have been in a relationship for six years and are engaged. The couple relocated to a new state for student Jesse to pursue his doctorate as a full-time student. Partner Oliver works in higher education and envisions a future graduate degree for himself.

### **Kendall and James**

Student Kendall self-identifies as non-binary, femme/cis expressive, white, and bisexual. Partner James self-identifies as cismale, white, and straight. The couple has been together for 14 years and are married. Student Kendall is pursuing doctoral studies as a full-time student in the location where the couple already lived. James works in an academic role in another state, so the couple lives apart during the week.

### **Mitchell and Rebecca**

Student Mitchell self-identifies as male and partner Rebecca self-identifies as female, and both identify as white and heterosexual. They have been together for over seven years and are married. The couple relocated to a new state for student Mitchell to pursue his doctorate full-time.

### **Myles and Faye**

Student Myles self-identifies as a Black, heterosexual man, and partner Faye self-identifies as a mixed race, heterosexual woman. The couple is married, have one child, and have been together for over nine years. The couple recently located to a new state for Myles to pursue a new student affairs administrator position, where he also recently began his doctorate on a part-time basis.

### **Sara and Tom**

Student Sara self-identifies as a white, heterosexual woman, and partner Tom self-identifies as a white, heterosexual man. The couple is married and have been together for seven years and relocated out of state for student Sara to pursue her doctorate full-time.

### **T.J. and Lucas**

Student T.J. self-identifies as a queer-gay, white man, and partner Lucas self-identifies as a gay, white, cisgender male. The couple is engaged and have been together for over three years. Student T.J. relocated to the location where partner Lucas was living to pursue his doctorate as a full-time student.

## ***PROCEDURES***

All participants were interviewed two times, using semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) (Jones et al., 2014). Both interviews were conducted on either Skype or Google Hangouts. In the first interview, individual authors interviewed the couple together. Joint interviews are useful because they offer an opportunity for the researcher to better understand how partners interact with one another (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014; Polak & Green, 2016; Valentine, 1999) and bring out nuances that may have been otherwise unclear from an individual perspective by providing a joint, reflective space for both participants (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). Initial questions were non-threatening and open-ended to allow for early comfort and narrative descriptions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Participants were also provided an opportunity to share any issues that were not addressed or asked about (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). After the joint interview, individual authors conducted individual interviews with each partner to gain greater insight into their individual views and perspectives. In both interviews, follow-up questions and prompts were used to probe for more information about a response (e.g., “tell me more about that,” and, “what did you mean by that”) (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews lasted around 60 minutes each.

## ***DATA ANALYSIS***

To analyze data, the authors read through each transcript and coded data using both deductive and inductive approaches (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In deductive analysis, specific concepts from the theory of linked lives were used as a sensitizing framework to guide the coding process (Elder, 1994; Han & Moen, 1999; Moen & Sweet, 2002). Inductive analysis was data-driven, and *in vivo* codes emerged from the data that did not necessarily fit with the theoretical framework (Glesne, 2016). Authors coded individually and then conferred with each other regarding codes that were shared or where codes differed on interpretation. We enlisted this method of inter-rater reliability to develop codes and ensure consistency between coders (McDonald et al., 2019). After the authors completed preliminary coding, thematic memos were written, and the authors de-briefed final themes as a research team. Following this debrief, the authors went back to the data to recode with these major themes in mind.

The authors used multiple strategies to ensure findings were trustworthy, including multiple researchers and debriefing findings (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The same interview protocols for joint and individual interviews were used by individual authors, and upon completion of a thematic memo, member checks were conducted (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by providing participants with a copy of the thematic memo and inviting them to provide feedback on the themes. Participant feedback was then integrated into the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

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Findings revealed three main ways that doctoral students and their partners navigated graduate education: shared decision-making; negotiating, turn-taking, and trading off; and strategically integrating or dividing academic and personal lives.

### *SHARING DECISION-MAKING*

The first way that doctoral students and their partners navigated graduate education was by engaging in shared decision-making processes. Shared decision-making was most frequently demonstrated in couples' approach to choosing when and where the student would pursue their graduate degree. All couples in our study discussed how the decision to go to graduate school was made jointly and in consideration of the potential opportunities for the student and partner. For example, student T.J. shared that he and partner Lucas were dating prior to his decision to get his Ph.D., but that they were in a long-distance relationship. As they got more serious, they saw T.J.'s decision to go to graduate school at the university where Lucas worked as being mutually beneficial to their relationship and T.J.'s academic pursuits. Additionally, student Sara and partner Tom explained that as Sara considered graduate school, the couple heavily weighed the reality of relocating. They specifically considered their desire to live in a place with greater diversity and where they could feel "at home." For student Jesse, pursuing a doctorate was always a plan, and it was something he and partner Oliver mutually understood. Still, partner Oliver shared that it was not a selfish decision, and that student Jesse kept him in mind the entire time he was in the search process. Oliver commented:

He could have done it differently, but I think that he kept me in mind. ... I can see some people being like, "I'm going to do what's best for me and if you can't make it, that's great." I don't think that we had that experience at all.

Instead, Oliver and Jesse were in constant communication about the decision. Similarly, student Kendall also considered partner James when deciding on which schools to apply. Because James was pursuing a postdoctoral fellowship at a specific institution, Kendall elected to pursue a degree at an institution relatively closer to James' workplace. Although the couple lived apart during the week, this arrangement allowed both partners to pursue their professional goals, though Kendall admitted, "It was going to be hard to sync those (professional advancement goals) up perfectly." In other words, Kendall and James engaged in shared decision-making in order to fulfill both partners' professional needs.

Often, couples relocated in order for the student to begin their degree, which meant the partner also needed to seek new employment. In these cases, students took into consideration their partner's professional opportunities when choosing to which schools they would apply and where they ultimately accepted admission. For example, partner Oliver wondered where he would work, and, together, looking at cities and schools became about both student Jesse's academic pursuits and Oliver's job prospects. While the "dual search" experience was stressful, Jesse shared that some of that stress was alleviated when institutions claimed they would also help facilitate job prospects for Oliver. To be as sensitive to Oliver's search as possible, Jesse committed to making a decision about which graduate program to enroll in early in the process, to provide time for Oliver to find a job.

Couples also engaged in shared decision-making related to making plans for after students completed their degrees. Student T.J. shared that he and partner Lucas would probably need to conduct a "dual-career" job search in the future, wherein T.J. would look for a faculty position and Lucas would look for a job in student affairs administration at the same institution. T.J. and Lucas shared that they spent a lot of time discussing what a dual-search would mean in relation to institution and geography, and how the institution at which T.J. was hired could make the dual-search more or less difficult. Similarly, partner Faye and student Myles both viewed Myles' studies as a means to an end. They both envisioned moving to a new state, with a new job, better income, and greater diversity as a result of Myles' degree. Faye laughed when she commented, "We talk about this every day. After this Ph.D., it's going to take about five years...but...sooner rather than later, we want to keep our eyes wide open, we'd be willing to take a job...ABD [All But Dissertation]." Put another way, couples not only shared decision-making in the short-term, but also shared with each other their visions and goals for the future.



### ***NEGOTIATING: TURN-TAKING AND TRADING OFF***

Another way participants navigated graduate education was by envisioning the experience as one that came with drawbacks and benefits for each partner that needed to be negotiated. Although couples attempted to share decisions and make them in ways that were mutually beneficial for both partners, couples also desired to negotiate each partners' professional and personal needs. These negotiations took two forms: turn-taking and trading off.

The first way participants explained their negotiation process was through the narrative of turn-taking. Couples frequently envisioned graduate school as a temporary time wherein the professional/academic interests of the student were the primary driver of the couples' decisions about where to live, what jobs to take, and how they would structure their lives. For example, partner Oliver described his position as a "trailing spouse," as he accepted a job opportunity at the same institution where student Jesse was attending school, even though the job was not the best fit for him in the context of his own career goals. Oliver explained, "I went in thinking, 'this is not the job I have to have as long as we're here, but it's also not the job that I have to have forever.'" Student Myles and partner Faye also described turn-taking as they navigated Myles' academic journey. During Myles' first semester, Faye had also begun an online professional degree program. However, over the course of the semester, Faye decided to defer these plans, after realizing the demands of student Myles' commitments both as a graduate student and a full-time student affairs practitioner. Faye shared, "I don't think that I'm going to be able to stay in school. It really feels like single parenting like a lot the time just between his full-time work obligations and his school obligations."

Couples navigated graduate education by viewing the experience as one filled with negative and positive tradeoffs. Negative tradeoffs often came in the form of sacrifices couples made to their relationships in order to facilitate the student pursuing their degree. For instance, student Kendall and partner James lived apart during the work week so that each partner could pursue their respective academic or professional careers in different, nearby states. A negative tradeoff partner Faye expressed was related to her family's relocation to a less diverse place for Myles' job. She explained many challenges around building relationships and finding a community, especially related to race and politics in her new geographic region. Similarly, student Mitchell and partner Rebecca lived separately for many months until Rebecca was able to facilitate a new work arrangement. She then joined Mitchell in the city where he was pursuing his degree. However, even after moving, Rebecca continued to experience stress related to living in a new place. Partner Rebecca shared, "I'd love to tell you it was all positive...literally on my end there is nothing positive about moving here." Finally, many of the couples discussed family planning and the tradeoffs associated with pursuing graduate degrees. Several couples explained wanting to wait until after the graduate program prior to starting a family. Student Sara explained:

I'm trying to think about the future, in terms of where we want to build our lives and raise kids as well, and we're planning to wait until after I'm done with the Ph.D. to have a family, but we want to make sure that all of the opportunities professionally are there for us.

Such tradeoffs speak to how the expectations around academic mobility and students' perceptions of the academic lifestyle shaped the experiences of couples.

On the other hand, couples also experienced positive trade-offs related to students pursuing graduate degrees. For example, although student Mitchell and partner Rebecca came from a rural state and were initially apprehensive about moving, they both grew to love the city they were living in. Mitchell explained that his degree program had afforded the couple access to diverse people, ideas, and experiences. Mitchell joked, "We call this our study abroad trip, because we don't know how long it's going to be here and it's so new." The couple discussed plans to stay in their city after Mitchell finished his degree. Additionally, Lucas and T.J. used graduate school as an opportunity to move-in together. Such experiences show that graduate school relocation provided participants with new growth op-

portunities, such as “testing out” a new city or being able to remove geographic barriers that had previously encumbered relationships. In all, turn-taking and trading off suggested that couples made strategic choices to navigate graduate education. In some cases, turn-taking was used to navigate the financial aspects of graduate education. In other cases, couples used turn-taking as a way to make sense of the temporary sacrifices they needed to make so that the student could complete their degree.

### *STRATEGICALLY INTEGRATING OR DIVIDING ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL LIVES*

A final way that couples navigated graduate education was by strategically integrating or dividing the student’s academic life from the couple’s personal life. Couples frequently discussed the ways the lines between the student’s academic life and the couple’s personal lives become blurry or integrated. Partners often discussed offering feedback on students’ personal statements during the application process or reviewing students’ course papers. For example, partner Oliver explained his involvement in student Jesse’s academic life when he said, “I read his papers or...I’ll talk with him through stuff. So talking about his classes and talking about his work...[I’m] somebody else that he can vent to, and just a sounding board.” Likewise, couples also frequently discussed topics in higher education and student affairs as part of their everyday interactions. For instance, partner Rebecca discussed that she had learned a lot about social justice from being enmeshed in the culture of student Mitchell’s graduate program. She said, “I’ve learned a ton from [institution]. Knowing how to address those topics, it’s easier to educate myself being tied to that network.” Student Sara suggested that partner Tom should attain an “honorary” Ph.D. in higher education because of the knowledge that Tom would gain over the course of her graduate training process. Couples showed a high level of integration between the academic and personal worlds, wherein the boundaries between the two were less separated.

Often, the integration of students’ academic and personal lives was facilitated by aspects of students’ institution and department. For some couples, partners were formally invited onto campus for events regularly throughout the year. Through these events, partners were able to meet colleagues with whom students regularly interacted. Tom and Sara explained that the social support offered by Sara’s graduate program had eased their transition to a new city. Tom commented, “A big help for right now is just having a college atmosphere around and people in her classes and whatnot, because obviously we’re all similar age and so it’s just your built-in social friend group.” Through Sara’s graduate program, Tom was thus able to make connections with Sara’s colleagues, thereby strengthening the social ties he had with Sara’s academic colleagues. These types of social ties positively impacted the experiences of both students and their partners by increasing social support and sense of community and reducing the separation between academic and personal life.

Couples also experienced challenges in achieving the integration between academic and personal spheres at the level they hoped. Some students explained that their departments and institutions did very little to facilitate connections between partners and school life, which caused a separation between their academic and personal worlds. For instance, student Kendall and partner James discussed the limited opportunities they had for integrating their academic and personal lives. James commented, “One time I met up with Kendall when she was at a conference and I met some of her colleagues there. But I don’t think I’ve ever met any of her faculty members or any of her professors.” Kendall later commented that if James knew more faculty or professors it would reduce the separation between the academic and personal realms. Other couples discussed how the demands of graduate school had unexpectedly influenced their ability to participate in their personal lives. Partner Faye described how student Myles’ demanding full-time job, on top of academic responsibilities, had constrained their ability to spend time as a family. She shared:

This last weekend, [Myles] needed to do homework pretty much all day long on Saturday and Sunday. I had to take the baby out of the house all day Saturday and Myles was out of

the house all day on Sunday. He didn't really get any family time...it's really hard...it's really busy.

Said another way, the integration of work and life was not always possible, and sometimes partners shouldered additional responsibilities within the home in order to counterbalance students' graduate school demands.

Likewise, couples sometimes experienced challenges in integrating the academic and personal worlds as students experienced stress and frustration related to pursuing their graduate degrees. This stress and frustration often shaped the experiences of the partner, who wanted to serve as a support system, but were not sure how to do so. Lucas, said the following of watching student T.J. navigate the initial few months of graduate school:

I'm clearly getting that feedback that he's frustrated. I don't know how to help. I can't talk about what class would be more helpful for him to take the next semester. I can't have a real conversation about your faculty. But what I could end up doing is just listen.

Such findings revealed the challenges couples experienced as they attempted to integrate students demanding academic lives, as well as the role partners played in supporting students throughout the experience.

Couples also attempted to make divisions between academic and personal worlds in order to maintain their relationships. Some students purposely refused to bring academic work home in order to ensure that their time could be spent with their partner or family. Student Sara explained, "It's hard to fit in everything that you want to do in addition to all of your responsibilities. But...I'm not willing to give up sleep entirely. I'm not willing to sacrifice every waking minute to my work." Likewise, student Jesse explained that he tried to be intentional about planning his academic schedule so that "on Saturdays or Sundays...the entire day is free. So we have a whole day at least once a week to go to the grocery store, to intentionally clean the house."

Partners played an active role in trying to help students maintain certain aspects of their lifestyle or carve out time to participate in non-academic activities. For example, many couples realized that having a partner with a full-time job allowed them to maintain some of the comforts of their pre-graduate school lifestyle despite the change in finances associated with one partner becoming a student. Partner Tom explained:

One thing that I personally very much pushed for us was to not have too much of a lifestyle change, to make sure we found that apartment that was in the budget...And I was lucky enough to get a job that paid me pretty well even starting out here...I wanted to make sure we didn't lose too much of what we had.

Other partners explained how they pushed for students to put away the schoolwork or spend time on non-academic activities at certain times, in order to give students a break from the demands of school. Almost all couples described how they had found time to do a shared activity. For example, partner Lucas described how he and student T.J. had developed a routine where they started working in the garden on Saturdays, an activity which facilitated their relationship closeness, in addition to forcing T.J. to spend time on a non-school activity. In other words, couples found ways to spend time together completely separate from academic life.

In all, our findings revealed that graduate education influenced the experiences of both doctoral students and their partners. Both students and partners experienced the stresses and frustrations, triumphs and milestones associated with graduate school, and couples developed strategies that allowed them to navigate the experience together. In the following sections, we describe some of the limitations of the study as well as the discussion and implications of this work.

## ***LIMITATIONS***

Our findings drew from a relatively small sample of graduate students and partners from higher education and student affairs. The focus on a specific sub-field limits the extent to which our results can be transferred or applied to the experiences of doctoral students at-large. As scholars in HE/SA studying issues that shape higher education, participants may have a greater awareness of the kinds of work-life challenges many in academe encounter and may thus be more proactive about managing their work and lives. There may be aspects of self-selection that influence our results: although we did not specifically recruit couples who identified as happy or stable within their relationship, it seems reasonable to assume that couples whose relationships were more secure would be more likely to discuss their experiences. Additionally, we centered the graduate student in this study, that is, prioritized the conversations and findings to be around role and experience of a graduate student with a partner, and the partner's experience with being partnered to a graduate student. We hope that our consideration of the theory of linked lives as applied to graduate students may offer some direction for future study in other fields or from other perspectives (i.e., the partner). Last, participants, though diverse in some ways (e.g., institution attended, geography, sexual orientation), were mostly white. Given the abundant literature on the role of race/ethnicity in graduate student experience (e.g., Ellis, 2001; Taylor & Antony, 2000), we recognize this lack of diversity as a limitation.

## **DISCUSSION**

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Consistent with past research, our results show that graduate education presents challenges for doctoral students trying to manage the demands of work and life (Lester, 2013a; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2016). Participants in our study experienced stress related to relocating for graduate school and the associated need for partners to find satisfying professional roles, changes in financial status, and finding time for their relationship in the wake of each partner's academic and professional demands. As in studies of faculty (O'Meara & Campbell, 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), partners often served as pillars of support for students during stressful times. However, while couples in our study shared anxieties and pressures, our results also showed that doctoral students and their partners established strategies and ways of making sense of graduate training that allowed them to maintain fulfilling relationships with one another. Some couples in our study used the decision to pursue graduate training as an opportunity to do new things as a couple and push their relationship forward that they may not otherwise have experienced. In other words, graduate education did come with drawbacks for doctoral students and their partners, but the experience was not entirely negative.

Our findings pointed to features of the graduate education experience that most shaped the experiences of doctoral students and their partners. Most obviously, academic mobility and the expectation that graduate students relocate to pursue their degrees (Clerge et al., 2017; Vohlídalová, 2014; Yakaboski, 2016) played a substantial role in the experiences of doctoral students and their partners. Similarly, institutional and departmental contexts (Campbell & O'Meara, 2014) also influenced the extent to which doctoral students and their partners felt satisfied about the graduate school experience and supported in their decision for one partner to pursue a graduate degree. Some participants in our study experienced institutional/departmental cultures that seemed to foster greater connections between partners and academic life. Such "partner-friendliness" was signaled through a recognition of dual-career concerns during the school application process or social events that connected partners to students' faculty advisors and peers.

The theory of linked lives helps us to better understand the experiences of doctoral students and their partners in multiple ways. Theories of linked lives indicate that, for individuals in romantic relationships, the boundaries between the personal and professional realms are often indistinct. This was true for participants in our study: when the student experienced stress or frustration (or satisfaction or success) within their program, those feelings impacted their partner and the couple's relationship as a whole. Our findings also highlight the active role of partners in providing emotional and academic support in ways that seemed to facilitate students' ability to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty

in their graduate programs. Said another way, the “link” between students and their partners was one that sustained and rooted students during times of transition and challenge.

Linked lives also helps to illustrate the tensions that couples in our study often experienced. The demands of graduate school often infringed on students’ ability to participate in aspects of their personal lives, and couples often made personal sacrifices so that the student could pursue their degree. This suggests that the graduate school experience often forces couples to identify the person whose academic/professional goals will take the “lead” (at least temporarily). This then influences the professional and personal choices of the partner, often in constraining ways.

Overall, linked lives reveal a layer to the graduate school choice process not often described in previous studies (e.g., English & Umbach, 2016, Millett, 2003): the consideration of a partner’s professional and personal needs. Students decided when, where, and how to enter a doctoral program based on not just their individual preferences, but also in reference to their partner’s professional goals/opportunities and overall relationship goals and priorities. That is, rather than understanding graduate school experience as one influenced by a student’s individual background characteristics, interests, and capital, our results show that, for students and partners, the graduate school experience is a shared one.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

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This study has implications at the student and organizational levels. At the student level, our study suggests graduate students and their partners should anticipate that graduate education will alter the ways they navigate their personal and professional lives. Our results suggest that couples need to develop new strategies as a couple for negotiating decisions and integrating the academic and personal realms. These strategies are developed over time, with couples who are at the beginning of the graduate education experience often experiencing greater stress or uncertainty as they adjust to their new reality.

At the organizational level, our study suggests that some institutions do better at recognizing the linked lives of doctoral students and their partners and, in doing so, seem to foster greater satisfaction among students. Graduate student orientation, family days, and creating connections between students and their partners can be a critical way to facilitate the transition into graduate school for couples together. For example, some institutions have put in place graduate student partner and family resources and programs (e.g., Gruder, 2019; The Graduate School, n.d.). Institutions should consider these kinds of initiatives to be critical for enhancing graduate student success.

While institution-wide programs for graduate students and their families may be useful, our study also indicates that higher education and student affairs programs can also better engage students and their partners. Programs should consider how to engage partners during the student recruitment and admissions process and recognize the dual-career concerns of graduate students in a similar way to those of faculty members. Ongoing support and discussion of work-life integration, perhaps during introductory doctoral seminars or capstone courses, may help couples better navigate the graduate school experience. Furthermore, students may wish to consider the extent to which their programs offer such resources as they consider the graduate program into which they will matriculate.

A few directions for future research emerge from this study. To more fully understand the influences of graduate school on couples over time, future researchers may want to consider longitudinal studies of doctoral students and partners over the course of graduate school through the transition into post-graduate positions. Future researchers might also consider comparing the experiences of doctoral students in different fields or at different institutions, to better understand the role of disciplinary cultures and institutional contexts in shaping experience.

## CONCLUSION

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Returning to Wedemeyer-Strombel's (2018) article, one might surmise that all doctoral students and their partners view graduate education as a deterrent to maintaining a long-term romantic relationship. Instead, we argue that graduate education comes with highs and lows for doctoral students and their partners. As Wedemeyer-Strombel (2018) asserts, there is more that institutions can, and should, do to recognize the work-life needs of doctoral students. Such attention can facilitate not only relationship health, but also graduate student satisfaction and well-being. Recognizing, and leveraging, the linked lives of doctoral students and their partners therefore serves as a new and useful way for institutions, graduate schools, and departments to approach graduate student success.

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## APPENDIX

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### *INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS*

#### **Joint Interview (Partners Together):**

- What is the status of your relationship (e.g., how long have you been together, when and how did you meet, how do you define your relationship)?
- (For those in graduate school) What brought you to pursuing a doctoral degree? What was that decision-making like? How did you engage with each other around this decision?
  - How did you choose your institution, geographic region, program?
  - How have finances/financing played a role in your decision to pursue a doctorate?
  - Did you leave a job to pursue a doctorate? What was that internal negotiation like as a couple? How did you make that decision?
- Tell us about what your day looks like when [student] has class. Who does what at “home?”
  - How did the daily routine change when [student] started school?
- How much do you engage around [students] school-related work?
- What are your plans for after graduate school is completed?
- Is there anything else that you would like to share about how graduate school has impacted your relationship, or how your relationship has impacted the grad school experience?

#### **Individual Interview (Student Partner/s):**

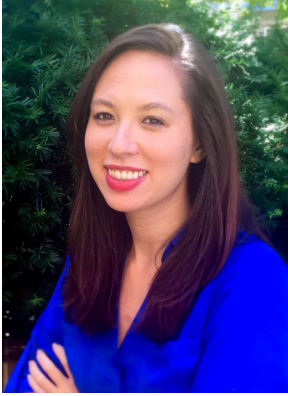
- Tell us about your experience as a student, having a non-student partner.
- Describe your workload. Describe how you balance all the responsibilities in your life, including being a student and the associated workload.
- What are your career aspirations? What type of jobs will you look for, and why? What personal considerations will you make or need to make as a result of those aspirations?
- What do you see as some of the differences and similarities as compared to those who do not have a partner that is a student?
- How does having a partner influence your academic experience?
- Revisit from joint interview:
  - Tell me about what your day looks like when [student] has class. Who does what at “home?”
  - How much do you engage your partner around school-related work?
  - Is there anything else that you would like to share about how graduate school has impacted your relationship, or how your relationship has impacted the grad school experience?

#### **Individual Interview (Non-Student Partner/s):**

- Tell us about your experience having a partner who is a doctoral student.
  - How/did you prepare for the academic process? With them?
- What do you see as some of the differences and similarities as compared to those who do not have a partner that is a student?
- How does having a partner influence your life? In what ways/where does that influence show up? And how often?
- Revisit from joint interview...
  - Tell me about what your day looks like when [student] has class. Who does what at “home?” How did the daily routine change when [student] started school?
  - How much do you engage around [students] school-related work?
  - Is there anything else that you would like to share about how graduate school has impacted your relationship, or how your relationship has impacted the grad school experience?

## BIOGRAPHIES

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