Abstract

This article addresses the challenges faced by graduate students throughout their academic journeys and highlights the pivotal role of organizations such as CERIC in enriching their experiences through active engagement, mentorship, and fostering a sense of connection and belonging. It emphasizes the significance of engagement programs, specifically focusing on the Graduate Student Engagement Program (GSEP). The GSEP offers valuable opportunities for graduate students to connect with peers and experts in their field, fostering an environment conducive to sharing experiences, exchanging knowledge, and building professional networks. GSEP serves as a platform for graduate students to showcase their work and research outcomes, receive constructive feedback, and actively contribute to a vibrant community of scholars. By acknowledging and supporting the unique needs of graduate students, organizations and engagement programs play a vital role in empowering the next generation of researchers and practitioners in career development.

Graduate students represent an asset for Canada and are key to many of the challenges we face today such as an uncertain economy or shifting labour market trends where employers are struggling with recruitment. At the same time, graduate students are also confronted with their own unique realities related to their academic pursuits and career paths, such as grappling with whether to pursue an academic or non-academic trajectory in their future employment. Moreover, many face identity crises, experience isolation and alienation, and often find themselves in an academic bubble, all while striving to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

This article discusses CERIC’s Graduate Student Engagement Program (GSEP), inviting readers to understand its historical context and follow its evolution, but also to anticipate and be part of its future. As CERIC looks forward to its next decade, the authors take this opportunity to consider innovative ways to engage the next generation of career development researchers and scholars. This article leverages existing literature on graduate student success and needs to inform the GSEP’s ongoing development for the benefit of current and future members and, ultimately, for public good.

The Current Realities of Graduate Students

Graduate students constitute a significant asset to Canada, possessing extensive knowledge and expertise that contribute positively to innovation and society at large (Jackson & Michelson, 2015). In recent times, the media and researchers (Balakrishnan et al., 2023; Berdahl, 2022; Cheng, 2023; Chi et al., 2023) have bestowed unprecedented attention upon graduate students. Various dimensions surrounding their academic pursuits have been deliberated, ranging from the dilemma of choosing between an academic career or entering a competitive job market, to the necessity for graduate students to develop transferable skills to thrive in a challenging employment landscape. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed the graduate student experience (Wong, 2022) by creating more isolation and difficulties in networking and showcasing their research.

A recent survey conducted by Leger (2023), examining the future of education in Canada, has shed light on the existence of a gap in universities’ provision of
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career-focused skills. This survey revealed that 73% of Canadians perceive practical work experience to be more crucial than formal education. This shifting perception regarding the significance of formal education, coupled with the growing recognition of alternative learning opportunities such as certifications, badges, and micro-credentials, may significantly influence students’ decision to pursue graduate school.

The 2021 Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC/CCREU) findings indicate that only two out of five undergraduate students plan to apply to graduate school, as many already have concrete plans for full-time employment. Moreover, the survey reveals that while 24% of graduating students believe their universities equip them with skills and knowledge relevant to employment, a mere 11% felt adequately informed about career options while in university. This disparity clearly indicates a deficiency in students’ preparedness for planning their futures, both within and outside academia. While surveys (Express Employment Professionals, 2023) report a positive change, as Canadian companies are open to hire recent university and college graduates, some of these individuals are still struggling to secure jobs and feel universities have not properly prepared them for the future (Maymon, 2023; Gismodi, 2021). The current job market is still highly challenging (CERIC National Business Survey, 2021) with individuals facing added pressure to proactively manage their own careers (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

It is imperative to devote special attention to the factors that influence graduate students’ decision-making processes regarding their future paths. This involves providing them with necessary guidance, understanding their socialization and belonging needs, and addressing other relevant considerations.

CERIC is a charitable organization that advances education and research in career counselling and career development, in order to increase the economic and social well-being of people in Canada. Organizations like CERIC have been aware of the role of graduate students and makes constant efforts to address their needs through initiatives like the GSEP. Programs like GSEP align with CERIC’s mission, which is to advance career development in Canada, believing that people have the capacity to use their skills and talents towards a more fulfilling future for all.

The pandemic has disrupted campus life, altering teaching delivery, learning formats, as well as faculty and peer connections. Elgar (2003) aptly referred to pre-pandemic as “an era of eroding campus services” (p. 11), which has been exacerbated by the crisis brought about by the pandemic, taking on new forms. The 2023 Survey of College and University Presidents (Jaschik & Lederman, 2023), encompassing 442 presidents from public, private nonprofit, and for-profit colleges, reveals that many institutions intend to maintain certain changes implemented during the pandemic in the long term. These changes include increased emphasis on online learning, modifications to the academic calendar, and reductions in physical campus infrastructure. Such transformations will inevitably impact the experiences of master and doctoral students throughout their graduate education and beyond.

Amidst ongoing societal transformations, the role and significance of graduate students in fields related to career development and counselling emerge as key elements for unlocking a better future. As Celinski (2022) asserts, the field requires agents of change, and to accomplish this, students must be provided with the full range of available resources. Thus, it is essential to pay greater attention to the “changing demographics of the graduate student population” (Greene, 2013, p. 50). Many individuals pursuing master or doctoral programs are categorized as “non-traditional students” who may have taken a hiatus after completing their undergraduate studies – working, starting families, and subsequently returning to graduate school. These students face distinct challenges compared to those who have followed a linear educational trajectory without interruptions. Moreover, studies conducted in Canada and the United States indicate the existence of a “PhD
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et al. (2015) challenge the commonly held assumption that doctoral advisors are the primary and essential source of career development for students. Instead, many students cultivate diverse networks for career guidance, including peers and short-term connections established through professional development seminars or workshops.

Apart from their department or faculty and regular academic conferences where they present their research and connect with fellow scholars, graduate students require support and opportunities. Antony (2002) highlights the multifaceted nature of doctoral student socialization and professional development. He asserts that students acquire scholarly thinking and behavior by observing faculty members, conducting independent research, and participating in professional gatherings. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that graduate education encompasses more than just a transitional phase; it involves assuming the organizational role of a “graduate student” (Golde, 2000).

Many post-secondary academic institutions have made graduate student engagement programs a priority to foster a supportive environment and offer guidance and opportunities for students to navigate their academic programs and post-graduation life. Employability learning and skill development is a significant component of these programs, equipping students with the necessary tools to reflect on their skills and prepare for their future careers (Healy, 2023; Bennett et al., 2020). Jensen and Jetten (2016) emphasize the relevance of acquiring a wide range of skills during university education to adequately prepare graduates for future job demands. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing debate regarding the level of preparedness of graduate students for non-academic careers after graduation (Pham, 2023).

The Role of Career Service Centres

Career services centres play a crucial role in graduate studies, yet their significance is sometimes overlooked. Traditionally, these centres have been associated with facilitating career exploration, preparing students for both academic and non-academic employment, and aiding in the transition from school to work (Lehker & Furlong, 2006). Over time, career centres have gained increasing influence within campuses, involving a broader range of stakeholders, including employers and government entities. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of these centres in assisting students with their career development decisions (Wetcher, 2021).

In the evolving landscape, career and professional development are expected to become integral aspects of the student experience, extending beyond a resource sought exclusively during the final stages.
of graduation. Rather than seeking transactional career services and programs, students should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful experiences, receive guidance from caring mentors, and consult knowledgeable career experts within their communities of professional interest. This comprehensive support will enable students to design their career trajectory, develop career adaptability, and embark on personal life missions that transcend traditional academic majors, and forge connections with career ventures rather than conventional jobs (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, p. 14).

Graduate Student Engagement

The decision regarding the academic institution and program a graduate student chooses, as well as the mentors they select, are significant factors in their educational journey. However, according to Kuh (2003), student success and development primarily depend on how students approach their graduate experience and the actions they take during this period. The manner in which students engage with their programs, professors, peers, and other learning opportunities is considered a skill in itself and a valuable resource. Traditionally, student engagement has been closely associated with activities within the confines of academic institutions, serving as a crucial element to “enhance learning and teaching in higher education” (Trowler, 2010, p. 5). Trowler (2010) defines student engagement as “the investment of time, effort, and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience, enhance learning outcomes and development, and improve the performance and reputation of the institution” (p. 6). Similarly, Ginting (2021) views student engagement as “active participation in a variety of academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, as well as commitment to achieving learning objectives” (p. 15).

However, it is crucial to consider engagement as an inherent part of the graduate student experience that extends beyond their formal program of study; it directly affects not only their grades or program excellence, but also encompasses “other educationally purposeful activities” (Kuh, 2009). Engagement is a multidimensional concept (Carini, 2012). Trowler (2010) delineates three dimensions of student engagement: behavioral (compliance with norms, such as attendance and involvement), emotional (affective reactions, such as interest and a sense of belonging), and cognitive (investment in learning).

Organizations like CERIC provide opportunities for the development of all three dimensions of student engagement in a non-academic context. By recognizing the value of graduate students and aiming to contribute to their growth while increasing society’s awareness of their worth and future contributions, these organizations offer avenues for comprehensive engagement.

The GSEP: Context and Background

Between 2010 and 2022, CERIC’s Graduate Student Engagement Program has hosted more than 178 members, who contributed 116 articles on varied topics in English and French that were published on CERIC’s website. GSEP students have presented results of their research interests and projects at Cannexus, Canada’s largest conference on career development.

CERIC’s Graduate Student Engagement Program (GSEP) serves as a catalyst for the active involvement of full-time graduate students in Canada who are pursuing research in the field of career development or related disciplines. The program, initiated in 2010, acts as a conduit, providing a platform for professional development and networking to connect students with the future generation of
researchers and practitioners in the field.

Malloy and Berdahl (2019) argue that doctoral students should proactively prepare for diverse career outcomes; programs like the GSEP offer an avenue for students to recognize the significance of engaging beyond their departmental research groups and peer conversations. Graduate students seek exposure to diverse perspectives, peers, experts, and sources of information and connection that extend beyond their immediate academic institution.

One factor that affects attrition rates among graduate students is a sense of academic isolation (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2004). The GSEP aims to minimize academic isolation by providing its members with opportunities to network not only with peers from different academic institutions but also with career development practitioners and experts, thereby exposing them to the practical aspects of the field. Golde (2000) emphasizes the need for graduate students to integrate into academic and social systems, highlighting the importance of forming friendships, participating in departmental and university-wide activities, and interacting informally with faculty.

Students in the career development field apply to GSEP primarily to connect and network with colleagues and experts in the field, gaining exposure to the career development sector and community to foster their professional development (results from 2022 and 2023 GSEP surveys). While some students mentioned the opportunities to showcase their research or broaden their knowledge, the program’s primary benefit or contribution to their professional and personal lives was the connection they forged with individuals who shared a similar career journey (results from 2023 GSEP survey).

GSEP promotes a social dimension that encourages interaction beyond the academic realm, thereby diversifying students’ experiences. Graduate student engagement is crucial for the socialization process that prepares them for their future professions (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (2019) revealed that respondents considered it highly important to collaborate with non-profit organizations and other academics/graduate students from different research institutions in Canada.

The absence of a community with whom graduate students can share ideas and challenges can have significant consequences, particularly when students lack information about their future career paths. Thiry et al. (2015) found that many students who possessed the ability to build non-academic networks were unaware of the career possibilities available to them. As a result, these students often postponed selecting and preparing for careers until the end of their professional development (results from 2022 and 2023 GSEP surveys). While some students mentioned the opportunities to showcase their research or broaden their knowledge, the program’s primary benefit or contribution to their professional and personal lives was the connection they forged with individuals who shared a similar career journey (results from 2023 GSEP survey).

As GSEP members, graduate students can join one of CERIC’s advisory committees, contributing to decision-making processes and engaging in deliberations with experts from diverse backgrounds, thereby exposing themselves to a range of opinions and expertise. The committees actively integrate and rely on graduate students as essential voices in their conversations, exemplifying the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

To ensure the visibility of students’ work within the academic and non-academic communities, GSEP places great importance on providing recognition. The program encourages members to compete for the CERIC GSEP Award, which grants free registration and up to $1,000 in expenses to attend and present a poster at Cannexus, Canada’s Career Development Conference. Between 2010 and 2022, 48 members were acknowledged for their work and received the GSEP Award. Additionally, GSEP members publish their research results or describe their projects in for the CareerWise website, which features top career news and views, with a popular weekly newsletter curating the best content. Students also have the opportunity to submit articles to the peer-reviewed Canadian Journal of Career Development.
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graduate studies.

Engagement programs like GSEP play a vital role in empowering students (Berdahl, 2022), raising awareness of their valuable skills, and equipping them with useful tools and resources for their future careers, both within and beyond academia. Universities and graduate programs that incorporate skills identification into their curriculum and offer engagement programs outside of the academic context can complement these efforts and enhance the overall educational experience for graduate students.

Mentoring and Peer Support

Post-secondary institutions across the country have recognized the value of mentoring groups in supporting graduate students throughout their academic journey. These groups often adopt a cohort model, where students progress through the program together, forming close bonds that provide emotional and career support (Lowery et al., 2018). The mentoring relationships fulfill two fundamental needs: career support and socio-emotional support, resulting in reciprocal benefits for both mentors and mentees (Reddick et al., 2012; Lowery et al., 2018). Peer mentoring, which deviates from the traditional hierarchical mentorship model, has emerged as a valuable alternative (Giannone et al., 2018).

In recent years, online mentoring has gained popularity due to the increased accessibility and prevalence of online programs. The COVID-19 crisis has further emphasized the importance of online support in graduate education (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). While online mentoring can provide guidance in professional development and research-related matters for graduate students (Byrnes et al., 2019), replicating the comprehensive benefits of an on-campus environment, including networking opportunities, poses a challenge. Surprisingly, students rely more on their peers than on advisors for career information, often observing their peers’ job search processes (Thiry et al., 2015).

Mentorship plays a crucial role in graduate school, yet a recent survey of graduate students (CUSC-CCREU, 2021) indicates that only a small percentage of students engage with career counsellors (21%) or have a career mentor (9%). While the benefits of having or being a mentor are evident, the process of identifying and approaching mentors or volunteering as a mentor can be daunting for graduate students. As networking and socialization increasingly occur online, it is necessary for mentoring processes to align with this evolving reality. Jones et al. (2012) highlight the importance of establishing an infrastructure based on a peer-to-peer support model to develop graduate students’ skills and career knowledge. Similarly, graduate students enrolled in the GSEP show a preference for an informal, user-friendly, peer-to-peer approach, where they can connect and share perspectives without hierarchical constraints. Co-mentoring programs have the potential to foster self-awareness and professional growth among students, contributing to their identity development (Murdock et al., 2013).

GSEP aims to foster a sense of community among graduate students enrolled in master’s and doctoral programs across Canada. It provides a platform for regular communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas and opportunities related to both present a poster at Cannexus, Canada’s Career Development Conference. Between 2010 and 2022, 48 members were acknowledged for their work and received the GSEP Award. Additionally, GSEP members publish their research results or describe their projects in for the CareerWise website, which features top career news and views, with a popular weekly newsletter curating the best content. Students also have the opportunity to submit articles to the peer-reviewed Canadian Journal of Career Development.
academic and personal aspects of students’ lives. Students appreciate the opportunity to learn from their peers about various strategies for navigating graduate school, advancing their research, and achieving work-life balance.

Next Steps: Involving the Career Development Community

Graduate students exhibit unwavering dedication to the study and pursuit of research pertaining to career development. As such, they merit unwavering support throughout their academic journey. By providing assistance aimed at broadening their knowledge and expertise, fostering a collegial and supportive community, and nurturing their self-assurance, the career development field can empower them to make significant contributions to the field.

CERIC is committed to ensuring that GSEP continues to be engaging and relevant for future generations of career development scholars and researchers. Accomplishing this goal will require support from the entire career development community, as different players in the field (career development professionals, educators, employers, associations) can bring unique value and expertise, to enhance the experience of graduate students enrolled in the program. The authors conclude with recommendations for graduate students, career development professionals, educational leaders, and researchers.

Recommendations for Graduate Students

Graduate students frequently underutilize scholarships and awards that could greatly contribute to their educational pursuits and enrich their learning experiences. This is often due to a lack of awareness about available opportunities, time constraints, and misconceptions about eligibility requirements. To address these issues, the following recommendations are proposed.

Be Informed about Graduate Student Engagement Opportunities.

Many graduate studies departments produce communications promoting opportunities related to funding, research, and career development that graduate students can subscribe to (if they are not already automatically subscribed). Students might also wish to keep their academic supervisors and faculty members apprised of their goals and interests, so these individuals can provide tailored advice and be on the lookout for relevant opportunities.

Be Strategic with Applications.

Graduate students lead busy lives and therefore they need to be intentional when applying to engagement opportunities. Considerations include: their goals and objectives and how the opportunity would help fulfill them; the talents and contributions they have to offer (e.g., serving on a committee as a graduate student representative); and how participating in this opportunity would align with their long-term career aspirations. Reflecting on these considerations will also inform the application writing process.

Connect with program managers and alumni.

To promote their program offerings, organizations might hold information sessions inviting prospective applicants to learn more about eligibility requirements, program goals and outcomes, and application and program timelines. These are excellent opportunities for graduate students to connect with organization representatives and pose questions specific to their individual scenarios. Additionally, if program websites feature alumni profiles, they can connect with these alumni and learn about their firsthand experience as former program participants.

Recommendations for Career Development Professionals (CDPs)

Engage with Current GSEP Participants.

GSEP participants have been actively taking part at Cannexus since 2011, presenting their research posters at the physical conference and virtually in recent years. Additionally, the CERIC website features a
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GSEP corner where graduate students provide a summary and/or reflection on their research related to career development ([https://ceric.ca/gsep-corner/](https://ceric.ca/gsep-corner/)). Career professionals can leverage these opportunities to get to know GSEP students, while tapping into graduate student research insights to inform their own professional practice. CDPs’ lived experiences as professionals in the field can help shape graduate student research by considering questions such as: How might their research topic and findings be applied to CDPs’ professional practice? What gaps or opportunities might be there that graduate students can explore, and in turn, help professionals in the field answer significant questions? In this sense, the motto, “help students help themselves (and the profession)” applies.

Promote the GSEP

CDPs tend to be well-connected individuals due to their inherent nature to be resourceful helpers. Because of this, many CDPs know people in their network pursuing graduate studies related to career development who might wish to apply to GSEP. Better yet, if CDPs themselves are pursuing graduate studies, or thinking about doing so, they could consider applying to the GSEP. Furthermore, since the career development field is pervasive and crosses over many other disciplines (e.g., mental health and wellbeing, social justice, and gender equality, just to name a few), there lies an immense opportunity to extend an invitation for graduate students from related fields to consider how they are fostering or can develop connections between their discipline and ours. Making these connections explicit strengthens the career development field. Additionally, CDPs can invite graduate students in their networks, connect with them on a one-on-one level, and help them strengthen their professional network and networking skills.

Help Shape the GSEP

Due to their regular interactions with graduate students, program administrators and faculty members are well-positioned to provide keen insights on how GSEP can cultivate students’ interest in pursuing research in career development and facilitate a transformative professional development experience. Paying attention to the graduate program cycle, for instance, led to a key decision for CERIC to shift the GSEP application due date from late March, typically a very busy time in the academic year, to late October, at the start of the typical academic year when new and current students are arguably more receptive to co-curricular opportunities. At the same time, CERIC and GSEP administrators are constantly collecting feedback from graduate student cohorts about what their needs and challenges are, how they are navigating their studies, and what support they wish they had; these insights are gathered regularly to inform program planning and development. Therefore, continual communication and feedback from those responsible for graduate programs are integral to the success of the GSEP.

Recommendations for Educational leaders in Graduate Programs Related to Career Development

Emphasize Graduate Student Career and Professional Development

Similar to the previous advice given to CDPs on promoting the GSEP, those who administer and teach in graduate programs related to career development can help graduate students see how professional development opportunities like the GSEP can enhance their student experience and further professional learning and networking. In this sense, these individuals can serve as career influencers (Ho, 2019) who contribute to student career development by exposing students to opportunities they wouldn’t otherwise have considered.

Recommendations for Researchers and Scholars in Career Development

Finally, the authors would like to highlight some potential
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Conduct an Environmental Scan

The GSEP would benefit from learning about other graduate student engagement programs, especially those related to career development. Specifically, it would be helpful to know and, if possible, exchange information regarding: the organizations that administer these programs (e.g., not for profit, professional associations, higher education), application and selection processes, key program activities and events, resourcing models, and program success metrics.

Conclusion

The current educational landscape presents unique challenges for graduate students, particularly when it comes to making decisions about their education and entering the job market. These challenges differ significantly from those faced by previous generations. Today’s graduate students encounter additional obstacles such as the difficulty of effectively translating the skills they have acquired during their master’s or doctoral programs to prospective employers. This can lead to them being labelled as “over-qualified” (Torunczyk Schein, 2019).

Addressing these challenges and equipping students with the necessary skills for the future is a significant undertaking that requires the involvement of various stakeholders, including educators, counsellors, and administrators (Watkins, 2020). Organizations like CERIC play a crucial role in providing opportunities for graduate students in the field of career development or career counseling to enhance their academic skills. It is essential for all actors within the ecosystem surrounding graduate students to foster partnerships between higher education institutions and organizations to contribute to the creation, development, and improvement of programs like the Graduate Student Engagement Program. These programs serve to complement the academic aspect of graduate education and bring substantial benefits to the graduate student community. Meeting the needs of graduate students should not rest solely on the shoulders of academic institutions but should involve multiple actors within society, as they will ultimately benefit from the skills and expertise of these students.

Moreover, it is imperative to engage in discussions about the new and enhanced structure of the program, while also initiating a dialogue about its sustainable future and how its continuity can serve the entire career development sector. By fostering ongoing conversations and collaborations, the career development field can ensure that the Graduate Student Engagement Program evolves in response to the changing needs of graduate students.

ideas for future research related to the GSEP.

Enhance the Program Evaluation Process

While there is a program survey conducted at the end of the program, there is potential to expand the evaluation component by introducing a pre-post survey to get a baseline of students’ self-evaluation of their competence and confidence, as well as program expectations, before they begin the GSEP. Having them complete the same survey at the end of the program would enable the GSEP program to measure participant growth and learning. Furthermore, focus groups could be conducted with participants to generate insights on strengths and areas of improvements for the program.

Reconnect with Past Participants

Those who previously completed the program can also provide valuable insights on how they experienced the program, what worked and what did not work, and what advice they would have for the GSEP administrators and future participants. Additionally, it would be of interest to see how they believe their participation in the GSEP shaped their career trajectory, if at all, and how their current professional roles connect to the career development field.
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Express Employment Professionals (2023). Graduating Class of 2023 in Demand: Job prospects


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CERIC encourages the engagement of Canada’s full-time graduate students whose academic focus is in career development or related fields. Faculty members are asked to help identify appropriate graduate students.

Through this program, graduate students will be introduced to CERIC and invited to:

- Compete for the CERIC GSEP Award, which provides free registration and up to $1,000 to cover expenses to attend and present at Cannexus, Canada’s Career Development Conference.
- Join one of CERIC’s committees;
- Connect with other graduate students through the GSEP Network;
- Write for the CareerWise website, featuring the top career news and views, with a popular weekly newsletter curating the best of the site;
- Submit an article to the peer-reviewed Canadian Journal of Career Development.

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