Professional Development and Networking: Cornerstones to Graduate Student Success
Ashley Garrin, Iowa State University, USA
Sara Jablon, Iowa State University, USA
Sonali Diddi, Colorado State University, USA

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Graduate students often are challenged in their scholarly and professional responsibilities. Previous research has found that this can be overcome through personal and academic support (Tint, 1993). Sweitzer (2009) notes that an “individuals’ networks influence career outcomes” (p. 4). As the reason for attaining higher education is typically for professional advancement, it is critical to students’ success in academia that they use out-of-class activities to enhance learning related to their discipline and future career prospects. In addition, engaged social membership within their graduate program is significant to student acclimation and persistence (Sweitzer, 2009). Therefore, graduate students need a system of support that enhances their present academic endeavors and provides opportunities for the future. That support may come from academic or industry colleagues and mentors, friends, or family. Another possible source of support is peers, other graduate students who have previously faced or are concurrently facing similar challenges.

The purpose of this paper was to examine how a discipline-specific graduate student organization can address and assist the needs of its member-constituents. The researchers used a descriptive case-study method to analyze the formation and development of the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design Graduate Student Association (AMDGSA) at Iowa State University. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with the AMDGSA Executive Committee and organization members, as well as through organization documents and archival records, such as the AMDGSA constitution and meeting minutes. The use of multiple data sources provided a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under consideration (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

The AMDGSA, re-established in 2013 at Iowa State University after several years of dormancy, was created by two doctoral students to build strong personal and professional connections among the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program’s graduate students. The organization’s Vice-President, a founding member, discussed that “there didn’t seem to be a framework in place to meet other graduate students… there wasn’t a peer support system for graduate students in our program, there was no community or networking” (personal communication, February 4, 2014). The AMD program consisted of about 40 graduate students, a diverse cohort in terms of demographics and level of degree completion. It was difficult for students to know each other or network given the size of the graduate student body. Furthermore, the research specializations within the program included consumer behavior, social aspects of dress and appearance, entrepreneurship, historic fashion, product development, technical design, textile science, merchandising, sustainability, retailing practices, and human resource management. With such varied specializations within the major, it was imperative to provide an avenue where graduate