how Environmental Science Graduate Students Acquire Statistical Computing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Modern environmental science research increasingly requires computational ability to apply statistics to environmental science problems, but graduate students in these scientific fields typically lack these integral skills. Consequently, many scientific graduate degree programs expect students to acquire these computational skills in an applied statistics course. However, a gap remains between the computational skills required for the implementation of statistics in scientific research and those taught in statistics courses. This qualitative study examines how five environmental science graduate students at one institution experience the phenomenon of acquiring computational skills in the context of an applied statistics course sequence, and the factors that foster or inhibit learning. In-depth interviews revealed three themes in these students’ paths towards computational knowledge acquisition: use of peer support, seeking out a singular “consultant,” and learning through independent research experience. These themes provide rich descriptions of graduate student experiences and strategies used while developing computational skills to apply statistics in their own research, thus better informing how to improve instruction, both in and out of the formal classroom.

Keywords: Statistics education research; Statistical computing; Computational thinking

1. Introduction

With the increased focus on data-intensive research, statistical computing has become essential in many scientific fields, however, the gap between science education and students’ computational knowledge has become more evident, particularly in the environmental and life sciences. The growth in computational power and the volume and variety of available data has multiplied the computational, mathematical, and statistical expectations of scientific researchers' abilities. However, an abundance of literature in the environmental sciences suggests graduate students are not acquiring the computational skills necessary for their research (Andelman et al., 2004; Green et al., 2005; Hampton et al., 2017; Hampton et al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2012; Mislan, Heer, & White, 2016; Teal et al., 2015). Contrasted with graduate students in the biological sciences, where structures exist to support computational knowledge acquisition (Stefan, Gutlerner, Born, & Springer, 2015), environmental science graduate students are required to complete graduate-level statistics coursework for fufillment of their degree. The requirement of graduate-level statistics coursework is intended to help these students acquire the statistical knowledge necessary for their research along with any essential computational skills; however, little is known about what avenues graduate students actually rely upon when faced with computational problems in order to apply statistics in the context of their research. The intention of this study is to understand and describe the experiences of graduate students in the environmental sciences when acquiring the computing skills necessary to apply statistics in their research. We consider the following research question: Where do graduate students in the environmental sciences gain the computational knowledge necessary to implement statistical analyses for research applications in their disciplines?

The subjects of this study were graduate students enrolled in the second semester of a graduate-level applied statistics course sequence at a mid-size university in the Western United States. The target audience of this course is non-statistics graduate students, and, at this institution, this two-semester graduate statistics sequence is either required or highly recommended for the completion of a master’s degree in departments such as Ecology, Land Resources and Environmental Sciences, Animal and Range Sciences, and Plant Sciences. This sequence of two semester courses covers the foundations of statistical inference, including a wide variety of statistical methods, starting from two sample inferences and moving through regression and generalized linear models to mixed models. Taught using an R (2018) programming environment, students are typically given code to modify, covering base R graphics, summaries, and built-in functions, while also being exposed to a few computational concepts such as loops, and conditional and relational statements.

Select graduate students in these fields complete a Graduate Certificate in Applied Statistics, which requires the completion of four graduate-level statistics courses. These four courses include the graduate-level applied statistics course sequence, as well as, sampling or experimental design, and one additional upper-level statistics course. The experimental design course covers the foundations of design and analysis of experiments, including a large variety of experimental methods, starting from matrix forms and moving through factorial, balanced complete and incomplete blocking, and split plot designs. The sampling course covers the cornerstones of sampling methodology, including a wide variety of probability samples, from simple random sampling to systematic sampling, and cluster sampling. Both of courses are taught using a SAS programming environment, where students are typically given code to modify. Other courses often taken for completion of this certificate include time series analysis, multivariate analysis, mixed effects models, and generalized linear models.

However, the majority of graduate students in these fields enroll in the graduate-level applied statistics course sequence or solely in the first course in this sequence. Thus, this terminal statistics sequence often serves as graduate students’ sole statistical computing course, and consequently their only formal preparation for the computational problems they may face when implementing statistics as researchers. In examining the experiences these environmental science graduate students face when acquiring the computational skills necessary to use statistics in their research, we seek to capture an in-depth understanding of the successes and shortfalls these students encounter in their computational journey.

Though the term “Environmental Science” refers to a specific discipline in the literature, in this paper we will refer to the collection of fields which perform research in the natural resource sciences as “environmental science.” These are the fields whose students are required or highly-recommended to enroll in the graduate-level applied statistics course sequence at this institution. We begin by describing areas of the research literature that address the computational and statistical training of graduate students in the environmental and biological sciences. We then describe the qualitative study we implemented to explore the experiences of graduate environmental science students in acquiring the computational skills necessary to complete applications of statistics in their research. The results presented reveal the prevailing experiences of these students when faced with computational problems beyond their understanding, and articulate the resources students employed to gain computational skills for carrying out statistical analyses.

1. Computing and the environmental Sciences

Research in computational abilities of environmental science students is in its infancy, with only a handful of institutions performing research that specifically addresses the computational training necessary to prepare students for careers post undergraduate or graduate degree. Literature related to this area has primarily focused on avenues that students could potentially use to increase their computational abilities, with no studies focusing on the resources graduate students actually employ when wrestling with the computing problems necessary to apply statistics in the context of their research.

In this section, we discuss briefly three broad areas of the research literature that informed this study. First, we review the literature on the foundational role computation has in the sciences. We then discuss research efforts detailing computational training in the environmental sciences, as compared with the computational training of graduate students in other biological fields. Finally, we detail research in Statistics Education declaring the importance of computing in the statistics curriculum.

* 1. Computing and statistics in the Sciences

Over the last two decades, the life and environmental science fields have seen a rapid increase in the use of computation and analytical tools to model phenomena across many disciplines of inquiry. In some scientific fields, such as biology and chemistry, the recent ability to collect multitudes of data easily and quickly have made computational abilities vital to researchers and practitioners. Meanwhile, fields previously thought to be niche disciplines, such as computational biology, are now “becoming an integral part of the practice of biology across all fields” (Stefan et al., 2015, p. 2). Across a large sector of scientific domains, computationally heavy applications of mathematical and statistical techniques, such as management of large data sets, dynamic data visualization, and modern data analysis, have become essential computational understandings for field applications (Weintrop et al., 2016). With these advances in computational power, analytical methods, and detailed computational and statistical models, scientific fields are undergoing a renaissance. These advances have, however, created a growing need for scientists to receive an appropriate education in computational methods and techniques (Fox & Ouellette, 2013).

Many chemistry, biochemistry, and bioinformatics programs have begun to incorporate computational training into their programs, however, a similar revolution, affirming the importance of computational proficiency, has yet to be experienced in the environmental sciences.

* 1. Computational Training for Graduate Students in the Environmental Sciences

The volume and variety of data collected by environmental science researchers for analysis continues to increase at a rapid pace, due to the availabilty of data from “long-term ecological research, environmental sensors, remote-sensing platforms, and genome sequencing” (Hampton et al., 2017, p. 546). These technological advances have, however, created a crucial need to reevaluate how our system of training can better prepare current and future generations of environmental researchers (Green, et al., 2005; Hampton et al., 2017).

Facing the new frontiers of big data, programming skills to manipulate, analyze, and visualize data will be necessary for many ecologists. Moreover, most environmental graduate students are required to write their own code as part of their research (Mislan, Heer, & White, 2016, p. 1), with the use of R as the “primary tool reported in data analysis increasing from 11.4% in 2008 to 58% in 2017” (Lai, Lortie, Muenchen, Yang, & Ma, 2019, p. 1). However, in a survey of a seminar course for graduate students in ecology, across 11 American universities, Andelman and colleges (2004) found that “ninety-three percent of students did not have skills in the scripted programming languages (e.g. SAS or MATLAB) that are needed for the integration of large datasets” (p. 244) and that one of the greatest limitations students experienced was related to data concatenation, manipulation, and analysis. Furthermore, in a recent survey of graduate students in the environmental sciences, “74% of students reported they had not completed any coursework related to the management and analysis of complex data” and only 56% of students “claimed a basic skill level in statistical applications, including R” (Hernandez, Mayernik, Murphy-Mariscal, & Allen, 2012, p. 1069).

This lack of computational training required for data analysis inhibits the progress of research and is laden with hidden costs. Teal and colleges (2015) suggest that “researchers learn most of what they know about programming and data management on their own or the infromation is passed down within a lab” (Teal, et al., 2015, p. 136). The costs associated with this process are substantial. Graduate students “can spend weeks or months doing things that could be done in hours or days,” they may be unaware of the reliability of their results, and they are often unable to reproduce their work. A lack in computational training, however, is not being experienced across all biological fields of research.

Researchers in the Department of Biological and Biomedical Sciences at Harvard have developed an intensive workshop that introduces graduate bioinformatics students to the "fundamentals of programming, statistics, and image and data analysis through the use of MATLAB" (Stefan et al., 2015, p. 2). This course is framed not only with the goals of developing programming skills and statistical understandings, but also emphasizing how to algorithmically reason through a computational problem. The structure of the two-week intensive “bootcamp” consists of five full, mandatory days. The workshop dedicates the first two days to an introduction to programming using MATLAB, where students learn a variety of topics, including creating variables, performing basic variable operations, indexing, logicals, functions, conditionals, and loops. Day 3 is dedicated to developing statistical understandings, including probability distributions, hypothesis testing, p-values, bootstrapping methods, and multiple testing. Day 4 covers topics in image analysis, and Day 5 assists students in working with their own data. These workshops are given twice a year, once prior to the start of the school year as new graduate students are attending orientation, and a second time for upper-level graduate students and post-doctoral fellows (Gutlerner & Van Vactor, 2013).

In introducing beginning graduate students to these concepts, researchers hoped to lower the computational barrier for students taking courses, empower students to learn computational tools on their own, and allow for other courses to "build upon this foundation and integrate quantitative methods throughout the curriculum" (Stefan et al., 2015. p. 2). Survey results from the last five offerings (Spring 2012 to Spring 2014) indicated that “students report significant gains in their self-assessed programming ability,” with students reporting that some of the computational concepts “around statistics [are the] most challenging” (Stefan et al., 2015. p. 8). These surveys also indicated that, following completion of the course, students believed they had acquired practical quantitative and computational skills that would prepare them for research in their field, recognized the importance of computational and quantitative methods in their field, felt confident in the methods they had learned, and would recommend that other graduate students learn these types of computational methods.

Providing effective training in data skills for researchers is wrought with challenges, among which lies the issue of a full curriculum. However, w the issue ofenvironmental science

* 1. Computing in the Statistics curriculum

The digital age is also having an overwhelming impact on the practice of Statistics and the nature of data analysis, which necessitates a” reevaluation of the training and education practices in Statistics” (Nolan & Temple Lang, 2010, p. 97). The skills needed by today’s practitioners of statistics differ profoundly from what was needed 20 years ago.

Over 15 years ago Friedman (2001) noted that “computing has been one of the most glaring omissions in the set of tools that have so far defined Statistics” (p. 8). This statement is echoed in the calls from Statisticians advocating for changes in the Statistics curriculum (Gelman, Gould, Duncan Lang, Kass, Nolan & Temple-Lang, 2010), as “what we teach lags decades behind what we practice” (Cobb, 2015, p. 268). Furthermore, computing has become more necessary to implementing statistics than even five years ago such that “a ‘just enough’ level of understanding of computing is not adequate” (Nolan & Temple Lang, 2010, p. 106).

Many Statisticians would agree that more computing should be included in the Statistics curriculm, so students leave the classroom more computationally capable and literate. However, many statistics students are “told to learn how to program by themselves, from each other, or from their teaching assistant in a two-week ‘crash course’ in basic syntax at the start of a course (Nolan & Temple Lang, 2010, p. 100). This do-it-yourself approach signals to students that statistical computing is not of intellectual importance compared to materials covered in lectures. Additionally, this structure inherits additional hidden costs, where students may pick up bad habits, misunderstandings, or the wrong concepts, they may learn “just enough to get what they need done, but they do not learn the simple ways to do things,” and the knowledge they possess when approaching a problem limits the tasks they are able to accomplish (p. 100).

For scientific research today, computing skills are vital, especially for scientific research requiring statistical analysis (Hardin, et al., 2015, p. 344). This brings to question whether students in our statistics courses acquire the confidence necessary to overcome computational challenges they may face in their scientific research. This study aims to close the gap in the research between the computational training of graduate environmental science students and the experiences of environmental science graduate students in acquiring the computational skills necessary to apply statistics in their field of scientific research.

1. Methodology

In this study we examined experiences of environmental science graduate students in gaining the computational knowledge necessary to implement statistics in their research, and the avenues that influenced these experiences. For this study, statistical computing is considered to consist of the computing knowledge and skills necessary for the entire process of statistical analyses, from data cleaning to data visualization to data analysis.

A phenomenology was appropriate for this study, as the intention was to understand and describe the “lived experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9) of graduate students in environmental science fields when acquiring the statistical computing skills necessary to implement statistics in their research. Implementation of statistics is necessary for many of these students to succeed in their Master’s and doctoral research, however across these fields students are not acquiring these necessaary skills within their graduate curriculum. A phenomenology aims to capture the essence of this shared experience through bracketing, analyzing, and comparing the experiences of different people (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

* 1. Participants

Students were recruited from the second semester of a graduate-level applied statistics course sequence in the spring of 2017. These students were interviewed following their spring break, nearly halfway through the course. Only graduate students taking the course for their respective master’s or doctoral programs in environmental science fields were considered.

Every environmental science graduate student was requested to complete a survey detailing their previous statistics and computer science courses, the computer languages they had experiences with, and their independent research experience. A total of eight graduate environmental science students were enrolled in this course in the spring of 2017, all of which completed the survey. All eight of these students were then asked to participate in an in-depth interview, of which five agreed. The interview protocol was approved through the Montana State University Institutional Review Board (AT030918-EX) and written consent to participate was obtained for every subject.

The five students who agreed to be interviewed all identified as women, and all had taken the first course in the graduate-level applied statistics sequence in the last two years. Additional details of these five participants are summarized in Table 1.

Of the five interview participants, four were taking the four graduate-level statistics courses required for completion of a Graduate Certificate in Applied Statistics. However, one participant, Catherine’s only prior statistics course had been the first semester of the graduate-level applied statistics course sequence. Every participant from the Ecology and Land Resources Environmental Science departments voiced that they had taken a required course for their graduate coursework which introduced Access databases, providing them with experiences working in SQL. Robin and Stephanie continued to use SQL during their independent research and Beth learned SQL independently at the recommendation of her adviser. Unlike many environmental science graduate students, Stephanie had experience with Java from her undergraduate coursework and gained knowledge for working in Python and R from a year’s work as a research assistant prior to enrolling in graduate school. Four of the participants had begun or were nearly finished with their master’s thesis, while Robin had just begun to work on the projects associated with her dissertation.

Table 1. Academic demographics of participants: degree seeking, program of study, academic year they took the first semester graduate-level applied statistics (GLAS) course (Fall, Spring), names of statistics courses they had taken during graduate school, programming languages they had experienced in their coursework, programming languages they employed during their independent research, and amount of independent research they had completed.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Name (pseudonym)*** | ***Degree Seeking*** | ***Department*** | ***GLAS I*** | ***Statistics Courses*** | ***Languages Introduced in Coursework*** | ***Languages Employed in Research*** | ***Independent Research*** |
| Beth | MS | Animal Range Science | F 2015 | GLAS I,  Experimental Design, Sampling | R | R, SQL | Thesis |
| Catherine | MS | Land Resources Environmental Science | F 2015 | GLAS I | SQL, R | R | Thesis |
| Kelly | MS | Ecology | S 2016 | GLAS I,  Experimental Design, Sampling | SQL, R | R | Thesis |
| Robin | PhD | Land Resources Environmental Science | F 2015 | GLAS I,  Time Series | Python, SQL, R | R, Python, SQL | A few projects |
| Stephanie | MS | Land Resources Environmental Science | F 2015 | GLAS I,  Time Series, Experimental Design | Python, Java, SQL,  R | R, Python,  SQL | Thesis |

* 1. Data collection

Following the preliminary survey, students who agreed to be interviewed were audio recorded working through a set of ecological applications of statistical computing. These tasks assessed students' abilities to reason through applications of statistical computing, and outlined their experiences acquiring each computational skill they employed. The statistical computing problems covered a broad range of tasks that may be necessary for research in environmental science, and were intended to gain an understanding of how participants had acquired the statistical computing skills they were familiar with. These tasks were not intended to determine what statistical computing knowledge participants did or did not possess, but rather to capture the experiences of these participants in acquiring statistical computing skills.

After reasoning through each task, students were asked where and how they had acquired the computational skill they had employed. Based on participants’ responses, the interviewer asked a follow-up question to gain additional information regarding why the pariticpant used this resource to acquire the computational skill in question. For instance, participants who voiced acquiring the statistical computing skill in a course, further information was saught out regarding why the student enrolled in that particular course. Alternatively, participants who voiced the Internet as their resource in acquiring the statistical computing skill were asked for additional information regarding what Internet resources they employed. All participants were asked if they attempted to use other resources when acquiring each skill, as well as how often they had used each resource when acquiring computational skills. Finally, every participant was asked to summarize where they have learned the computational skills necessary for implementing statistics in their research. The full interview protocol is included as an Appendix and the statistical computing tasks are included as Supplementary Materials.

The analysis in this paper is based on participant responses to questions regarding their experiences acquiring the computational skills they employed while reasoning through these statistical computing tasks, as well as responses to where participants stated they had acquired the statistical computing skills necessary to apply statistics to their research.

* 1. Data Analysis

A three-stage data analysis process was used, lead by the primary author. In the first stage the interviews for each participant were transcribed verbatim, with participants' names removed and pseudonyms given. Subsequently, the primary author independently read the transcripts and created descriptive codes for the avenues through which the participants voiced having acquired the computational skills they employed when reasoning through the statistical computing tasks. Included in this process, the author looked for specific references to how the courses taken by the participants had influenced their acquisition of statistical computing skills.

After working through each transcript in this manner, the primary author began the process of analytical coding. In this process, every avenue was given equal value and “nonrepetitive consitituants of experiences” were linked thematically (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). Categories of experiences that held across multiple interviews were retained. For example, every participant voiced persons they seek out as avenues for knowledge acquistion. The names of these individuals were initially analytically coded to belong to the category of “learning from others.” Based on these groupings initial categories of course work, research experience, and learning from others were constructed. Next, the primary author searched through the data to identify successes and limitations voiced by the participants when acquiring statistical computing skills within these categories. Through this step it was eluminated that certain categories were instead subcategories, while others were independent of one another. For example, some participants voiced exposure to computational skills in the statistics classroom, but emphasized that their understanding of these skills instead came through interactions with their peers or when using the methods in their own research. Additionally, participants found great success in acquiring statistical computing skills from a single person in their lab or department, as compared to the limited success select participants had when using their peers to acquire statistical computing skills.

In the final stage, the primary author identified emerging themes arising from these categories in order to describe the phenomena of acquiring statistical computing skills. The author searched for instances which reiterated the themes, as well as negative cases, with attention paid to the transcripts throughout the validation process. Following the validation process, bouth authors met to discuss the rationale for coding, scrutinizing the situation of each participant’s description of their avenues of knowledge acquisition in the context of the emergent themes. Ultimately, a consensus was reached regarding the categories in which each participant’s response was placed.

Although the frequency of use varied across participants, every participant voiced experiences acquiring statistical computing skills across every avenue, supporting the themes that emerged. The final themes were exhaustive, such that all of the data fit into a category or subcategory, mutually exclusive, such that a unit of data could fit into only one category, and were sensitizing, so that the name of the theme authentically represented the data (Merriam, 2009). These final themes present the “essence of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 62) of acquiring the computational skills necessary to implement statistics in environmental science fields.

Following this process, the participants were provided with the table outlining the computational skills they employed when completing the statistical computing tasks and the avenues they voiced acquiring each skill from. This inclusion of member checking allows participants to check for accuracy of their statements. The ability of this study to authentically capture the experiences of students is enhanced with the lack of researcher engagement with students prior to their participation in the study. This helped to ensure that no student felt more comfortable in the interview environment, articulating their experiences, than any other student.

1. results

When investigating where these students gained their computational knowledge, we expected themes of content and support structure to emerge. However, the themes that emerged from every participant’s interview primarily related to the support structures they employed, rather than the content that helped them succeed when performing applications of statistical computing. In this section, we present these themes that developed throughout the participants’ interviews: (1) independent research, (2) singular consultant, and (3) peer support. A sub-theme of “coursework” appeared within peer support and independent research, where participants voiced the importance of their coursework on their knowledge of statistical computing. However, this sub-theme was consistently voiced to depend on either peer assistance or independent research in its impact on participants’ understanding of statistical computing. The themes and sub-themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants’ themes in acquisition of statistical computing knowledge

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Theme*** | ***Sub Theme*** | ***Description*** |
| Independent Research | Coursework | Research experiences that allowed students to take their course knowledge and transfer it to statistical computing applications |
| Singular Consultant |  | All-knowing past or current graduate student whom students sought out for computational assistance |
| Peer Support | Coursework | Assistance from peers with statistical computing tasks |

In the sections that follow, we provide a detailed description of each theme, supplemented with quotations from participants to ensure authentic of descriptions of their experiences.

* 1. Independent Research Experience

The first theme in acquiring statistical computing knowledge was participation in independent research. Involvement in independent research helped students transfer their course knowledge to statistical computing applications, seeing the messiness of non-classroom applications. These experiences came predominantly in the form of working as a research assistant prior to entering graduate school, collaborating on a project in the first year of graduate school, or performing research for a master’s thesis, or ultimately, a doctoral dissertation.

Catherine, a master’s student in Environmental Science, who still faced everyday computational struggles, attributed the majority of her application-specific computational knowledge to her experiences in independent research. She emphasized the importance of understanding how to work in a statistical computing environment, such as R, which she learned by performing research, before she was able to begin to transfer the statistical knowledge she had learned in the classroom to her research:

What I struggled with is [GLAS I] covers theory really well, but since I was new I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to apply that theory in [R]. And even now I struggle transferring from R into actual statistical theory, when I'm writing my thesis. The way I had to approach it was I had to learn the R first, then I was able to look back on what I had actually done, in order to learn the statistics.

Kelly, an Ecology master’s student, described her experiences with data management for her master’s thesis as having produced the most substantial contributions to her computational abilities. Often she attributed her intuition for solving statistical computing problems to experiences she had “merging data sets” and learning to use conditional statements for her research project. She emphasized the importance of her statistical knowledge gained in both graduate-level statistics courses in understanding “what statistical method to use,” while she attributed becoming more fluent in statistical computing to her research experiences: “The data management stuff comes from independent research, trial and error, getting myself through.” Similar sentiments were voiced by Beth, an Animal Range master’s student, with the majority of her computational knowledge stemming from her independent research. With the recommendation of her adviser, she taught herself how to create an Access database to store her data. In storing her project in this manner, she was able to learn important concepts about data structures, subsetting data “using qualifiers and criteria,” and sorting data, skills which were then easily transferred into R to manage data for analysis.

* 1. Singular Consultant

When describing whom they seek out for computational help, every participant described first seeking out an “all-knowing” past or current graduate student. These figures served as “singular consultants,” with whom these students had the "best," most productive, experiences in finding solutions to computational problems that had arisen in their implementation of statistics to their research. For Beth, this singular consultant came in the form of a past graduate student from Animal Range Sciences who was hired to help faculty complete projects:

We have a guy who used to be a student in our department and then he was hired on again to help finish some projects, after he got his master’s in Statistics. He is very helpful with [pointing out what's wrong with your code]. He's very good with code and if I have a quick question he can always answer it.

For Kelly, another graduate student on her same project served as this consultant. Kelly described turning to this particular graduate student for help with computational problems she had encountered in her thesis; she added that other graduate students in their department also used this person as a consultant for their computational problems:

The other grad student on this project is so well versed in R that he's unofficially become the person that people go to with questions.

Throughout her computational struggles, Catherine found assistance from previous graduate students from the department, but she found the most assistance from a previous graduate student “who had left the department and was off professionally somewhere else, but he still took the time to help walk me through [my code]."

One participant, Stephanie, a Environmental Science master’s student, served as this singular computational consultant for many members of the Environmental Science department. With her experiences teaching herself R, she was able to “explain code in a way that makes sense,” says Robin, a fellow Environmental Science doctoral student who has often sought out help from Stephanie. With an adviser from a computational background and a project which performs sophisticated statistical modeling, Stephanie “has to learn code.” Additionally, her laboratory often worked in collaboration with computer science faculty, where she and her lab-mates were taught computer science coding practices and jargon. “Stephanie has gotten good at teaching it, because everyone on our floor is like ‘I can't do this, Stephanie help me’,” said Robin. Stephanie stated that graduate students have sought her assistance “daily” or “at minimum two to three times a week.” In contrast, when Stephanie experiences difficulty in performing computational tasks, she has found solace in her lab-mates and ultimately, when necessary, with her adviser:

My entire lab works in the same room and my adviser's door is always open. So if someone is having a major issue, whoever is in the room can hear that. If [my adviser] hears me ask [lab-mate] how to do something and he knows how, he just shouts how to do it. So it's a very group oriented dynamic. I've never had to go beyond the people in my lab.

* 1. Peer Support

The third theme in acquiring computational knowledge which all participants spoke of was the support they had received from fellow graduate students when performing computational tasks related to applications of statistics. The students described how, when they are unsure of how to complete a computational task for their research and their singular consultant is not available to them, they turn to fellow graduate students for help. Participants described instances when the computational tasks required of them were beyond their current knowledge or occasions when they had been unsuccessful at attempting to complete a problem and sought out help from a fellow graduate student. For example, Kelly, an Animal Range Science master’s student, shared that when she reached a point in coding when she doesn't know how to do something she turned to one of her lab-mates:

I've been to a point where I didn't know how to do something with my knowledge or what I can find online, and then I'll go to one of my lab-mates.

Catherine, a master’s student in Environmental Science, spoke of the expectations of her advisers that the computational problems she was being asked to perform were “easy, since she had all the information.” However, she has had numerous experiences where she did not have the knowledge necessary to perform the task or she was missing “little caveats" that kept her from fully being able to perform the tasks. When faced with these problems, she “reached out to previous students that had taken the course.”

Robin, a doctoral student in Environmental Science, reiterated Catherine's experiences, describing how she reached out to other graduate students in other labs for help with computational problems. Stephanie, however, as a singular consultant, voiced that when she was faced with computational problems beyond her knowledge, she had never been forced to “go beyond talking to her lab-mates” for assistance.

However, peer support does not always provide an optimal solution, a potential reason for participants seeking help from peers only when their singular consultant was unavailable. For example, Kelly described negative experiences when seeking computational assistance from graduate students not of close proximity to her:

When I'm struggling with something and I go to other grad students, they'll say “I did this the other day. I'll send you my code.” I've found most of the time I don't understand what they've done enough to plug in what I want and make it work. There have been a few times when making tables and plots and someone sends me their code and I can just plug in my data and it works just fine. I've had less success with that.

1. Discussion

The present study, while exploratory in nature, outlines the experiences of environmental science graduate students in obtaining the computational skills necessary to apply statistics in the context of their research. The themes identified for these experiences and their corresponding examples illustrate the experiences of each participant. These results help to eluminate the gaps that exist between the statistical computing skills these students acquire through their curriculum and the computing skills required for them to successfully implement statistics in their research.

The expectation of coursework to be a primary source of statistical computing knowledge was not found for these participants. Indeed, when these graduate students encountered a statistical computing problem, they first pulled upon the knowledge they had acquired through their previous background experiences, graduate coursework and independent research, but this knowledge was often insufficient. Rather, the computational understandings that these students attributed to their statistics coursework were primarily low-level concepts, such as using built-in R functions, adding comments to their code, and limited trouble-shooting of error messages. Additionally, these concepts were said to only be fully understood through participants’ peer interactions, or as they were being implemented independently, within their own research.

Participants voiced the importance of their experiences performing independent research as having a substantial influence on their abilities to reason through and perform the computational tasks required for various statistical analyses. Through independent research, the participants were able to play with real-world data and applications outside of what they had encountered in the classroom. The programming understandings developed during a student's independent research, in conjunction with peer collaboration, were described largely as high-level concepts, such as conditional statements, loop implementation, and user-defined functions. Students described their independent research as having opened the door to experiencing the unease that comes when one is asked to perform statistical computing tasks beyond one's knowledge, a feeling they had not experienced in their courses. In these circumstances, students stated that they would ask for help from the people with whom they felt the most comfortable.

In a direct connection to the participants' discomfort in asking for help from an adviser, the theme of a singular consultant emerged. These singular consultants served as an “all-knowing” individual, from whom the participants had either had the “best” experiences with, where the individual spent the necessary time to explain the concepts, or the consultant had always been capable of providing the participant with a solution to their problem. These individuals served as the first line of defense when statistical computing problems arose, where participants were both able to seek computational help and acquire new computational skills and understandings through their interactions. If due to time or physical constraints, this consultant was unavailable to the graduate student, these students then turned to their peers.

Peer support was initially discussed by the participants in their interviews as a mechanism they used when their “code doesn't run” or when they were asked (or needed) to do something beyond their current computational understandings. However, this theme continued to emerge as the participants worked through computational problems, often attributing their knowledge of a computational procedure to a friend or fellow graduate student helping them “do it with their data.” These peers offered an avenue for students to seek help, often voiced to be more comfortable than asking an adviser, where participants described both the fear of asking and “feeling dumb” or being “brushed off” because their adviser thought they should “be able to figure out how to do it.” However, as opposed to the help participants received from their singular consultant, these students also voiced negative experiences they had encountered when seeking help from their peers, such as a peer sending them “helpful” code that they did not understand.

Lastly, the adviser played an important role in students acquiring the computational knowledge necessary to perform applications. Despite students’ reluctance to seek out computational assistance from their adviser, advisers did often emphasize the importance of statistical computing skills, as well as introduce (or recommend) students to store their data using a relational database. The participants’ ability to understand both data structures and sorting or filtering data was largely attributed to their experiences working with these types of databases. Although these interviews found that advisers were often considered as the last line of defense, they were, however, viewed as an accessible way for students to better understand the statistical computing necessary for their independent research projects, which overall contributed to better computational understanding and skills for these students.

1. Implications

The implications for statistics education focus on the importance of graduate students’ acquisition of the computational knowledge needed to apply statistical methods in their own research. Environmental science fields have long understood the importance of a statistics education for their students. Many of these graduate programs are not actively incorporating computational courses into their degree, instead assuming that students are acquiring these skills in their recommended statistics courses. However, as witnessed in the research on computational preparation of environmental science students (Andelman et al., 2004; Green et al., 2005; Hampton et al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2012; Mislan, Heer, & White, 2016; Teal et al., 2015) and the inclusion of computing in the Statistics curriculum (Friedman, 2001; Hardin et al., 2015; Nolan & Temple-Lang, 2010), the experience of computational ill preparation is not unique to students at this institution. A restructuring dilemma is faced by both parties involved, with intractable differences between coursework and research expectations.

* 1. IMplications for science educators

The impact of an undergraduate education on students’ experiences as graduate researchers should be considered by statistics, ecology, and environmental science faculty in higher education when recognizing the importance of developing data-intensive statistical computing skills early on in undergraduate statistics courses. In this study, none of the participants voiced having any experience working with R in their undergraduate coursework. Instead, these students encountered R for the first time in their first semester of graduate school during the first graduate-level applied statistics course. The participants who had computing experiences in their undergraduate coursework or postbaccalaureate research work or experience with Access databases were able to navigate learning R with greater ease than students with no computing experiences. This lack of computing experiences further compounded when students began their independent research, where students with fewer computational skills and understandings had substantially different independent research experiences than their counterparts with more. The frustrations of simple tasks, such as subsetting data or removing NA's, were felt by the participants who had completed a bachelor's without any computational elements to their coursework, while those who were exposed to even small amounts of computing in their undergraduate coursework were able to begin computational tasks in their research walking and not crawling.

* 1. IMplications for statistics educators

Statistics educators should consider the power an applied statistics course sequence has to provide graduate students with a year-long introduction to statistical computing. As seen by Stephanie, who entered graduate school after completing a year's work as a research assistant working in R, these learning experiences can help to alleviate the power differential students feel when asking their advisers or peers for assistance. However, the content covered by graduate applied statistics sequences is expected to paint a vast picture of the field of statistics, with topics ranging from a difference in means to mixed-models. Consequently, many educators feel they do not have the time to incorporate statistical computing into the classroom, and some feel that they have limited computational expertise to teach these concepts (Hampton et al., 2017; Nolan & Temple Lang, 2010). The inflexibility of graduate programs further complicates this issue, as many graduate students are unable to enroll directly in a statistical computing course due to an already full and demanding course load. Thus, questions should be raised about how to best bridge this gap between coursework and research expectations for statistical computing skills.

The importance of playing with statistical applications on real-world data, as voiced by these participants, should be also considered by statistics educators at all levels. This transition to incorporating authentic, research-like tasks, which engage students in statistical computing, can be supported by online resources, data-discovery tools, example datasets and code, and instructional tools, along with collaborative course designs and the sharing of instruction materials.

* 1. Limitations and future research

While the methodology used to describe the phenomenon of acquiring the computing knowledge necessary to implement statistics for graduate students in the environmental sciences provided important themes of knowledge acquisition, it is not without its limitations. Eliciting descriptions of computational knowledge acquisition yielded varied experiences with each of the main themes, but richer data could be gathered in a future longitudinal study. A study following graduate students throughout their program of study could identify where students are acquiring statistical computing knowledge, as well as instructional methods that best assist students in obtaining these understandings. To better inform science and statistics faculty, a thorough investigation of both the coursework and structure of courses completed by these participants could be performed. This would allow for a discussion of how to best integrate these computational concepts into current coursework requirements, so that students leave the classroom with understandings they can implement immediately in their own research.

1. conclusion

Statistical computing has become a foundational aspect of research in the environmental sciences. This small-scale exploratory study brings forward the experiences of graduate environmental science students in acquiring the computational understandings necessary to successfully perform applications of statistics for independent research. Participants found the greatest success in acquiring the computational skills required for their research through independent research, a singular consultant, and peers. Whereas others have noted the importance of integrating computing into the statistics curriculum ( Friedman, 2001; Hardin et al., 2015; Nolan & Temple-Lang, 2010) or the lack of computational preparation for environmental science graduate students (Andelman et al., 2004; Green et al., 2005; Hampton et al., 2017; Hampton et al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2012; Mislan, Heer, & White, 2016; Teal et al., 2015), we instead explored the phenomenon of acquiring the computational knowledge necessary to implement statistics in graduate environmental science research. The computational burdens experienced by these participants when implementing statistics in the context of their research and the computational understanding with which they left the statistics classroom, suggests the need for integration of formal computational training into these programs. The present study helps to emphasize the importance of computing skills necessary for data-intensive environmental science research.

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APPendix

Interview Protocol

Where and how did you acquire this computing skill?

Why did you use this resource to acquire this skill?

Did you try other resources when learning this skill?

Have you used this resource to acquire other computational skills?

If yes, how often? If no, what other resources have you used to learn computing skills?

Where have you learned the computing skills necessary to implement statistics in your research?