

The State of Community Engagement in Graduate Education: Reflecting on 10 Years of Progress

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Ten years ago, we examined the evolving landscape for community engagement in graduate programs, from its historical underpinnings to the recent “renaissance... in higher education community engagement” (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 3). Our consideration of graduate-level community engagement at that time shed light on multiple challenges and opportunities for integrating reciprocal, mutually beneficial interactions between graduate students, faculty, and members of the public. We were optimistic in our presentation of exemplary engagement practices in professions such as medicine, public health, and law, anticipating that such models would lay a foundation for community engagement in other areas of graduate study. The article we contributed in 2006 culminated with a set of recommendations for individuals—leaders of service-learning and outreach organizations, as well as faculty and administrators within academia—seeking opportunities to strengthen the scope and impact of community engagement in graduate higher education.

In the decade since our article appeared in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, it has been heartening to see a sustained interest in graduate-level community engagement reflected in higher education scholarship and practice. The advent of Carnegie's Community Engagement classification (the foundation's first-ever elective classification) in 2006, as well as its present influence on higher education nationally, also emphasizes the continued relevance of conversations about community engagement within our field. Consequently, it seems fitting that we briefly highlight the progress that has been made in the realm of graduate education, since our prior research was published in this journal, and comment on areas of potential future growth for community engagement in this domain.

Perhaps the most promising development of note in recent years involves positive trends in interdisciplinary studies. Previously, we identified highly specialized research—an approach to knowledge generation that is broadly valued in higher education—as a significant barrier to graduate-level community

engagement because it precludes the consideration of “multiple, even competing, perspectives” (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 21) when addressing complex social issues. Conversely, we argued that engaged scholars could more readily identify appropriately nuanced solutions to real-world problems by spanning disciplinary boundaries. Thus, it is encouraging that 71% of faculty engage in academic research that spans multiple disciplines, and over 40% teach an interdisciplinary course (Eagan et al., 2014). A substantial rise in the number of interdisciplinary undergraduate majors since 1975 (Knight, Lattuca, Kimball, & Reason, 2013) suggests that students may be increasingly inclined toward interdisciplinary work at the graduate level as well. Indeed, 28% of recent graduate students reported being engaged in two or more fields when conducting their dissertation research (Millar & Dillman, 2012). This heightened interest in exploring multiple areas of study, among both emerging scholars and the faculty who shepherd them through their graduate programs, has positive implications for the future of community-engaged scholarship.

The recent attention given to interdisciplinarity extends beyond the walls of academia to agencies like the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, which have collectively issued a report emphasizing the importance of translational research and community impact (National Academy of Sciences, 2004). Relatedly, the federal government supports cross-disciplinary, socially relevant scholarship via funding channels like the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH), which make possible research in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education; health equity; and cyber security, among others. The NSF also offers its Research Traineeship program (NRT), “dedicated to effective training of STEM graduate students in high priority interdisciplinary research areas” (National Science Foundation, n.d.b), to cultivate engaged scholars who are attuned to community needs and equipped to address them effectively.

In our original article, we posited that traditional reward structures for faculty advancement posed significant challenges to community engagement in graduate higher education. For example, the attainment of external funding is weighted heavily in the tenure and promotion process, yet such funding often supports knowledge creation that contributes to disciplines and fields without an emphasis on translation and engagement with contemporary policy, practices, and problems. It is therefore promising that large, influential funding organizations are beginning to shift the tide by

requiring researchers to provide evidence of intellectual merit *and broader societal impact* in their grant applications (see *National Science Foundation, n.d.a*). No more are the aims of community engagement and an academic career path necessarily at odds (*Post et al., in press*). Rather, they are dovetailing (perhaps not coincidentally) in an era when the majority of doctoral students are expressing (a) a desire to serve their communities and (b) a perceived lack of support for doing so within their graduate programs (*Golde & Dore, 2004*).

Fortunately, students who are not receiving the guidance and leadership they desire vis-à-vis community-engaged scholarship from within their institutions have access to a growing number of networks, trainings, and resources at the national level. In this respect, it seems our 2006 recommendation for increasing engagement-focused professional development opportunities has borne fruit. Initiatives such as Imagining America's Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows (<http://imaginingamerica.org/student-engagement/>), the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) Next Generation Engagement project (http://nerche.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=355&Itemid=96), and the International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN; <http://www.education.uw.edu/cirge/subscribe-to-the-international-doctoral-education-research-network-idern/>) prepare future faculty for meaningful engagement in both domestic and global communities. These networks expose emerging scholars to the service dimension of academic life, offering a more holistic view of faculty responsibilities than more traditional research and teaching assistantships provide. When interested graduate students have opportunities to meet like-minded colleagues and gain knowledge of community engagement *outside* their institutions and fields of study, barriers to engaged scholarship that exist *within* particular spheres of higher education (some of which are described in our previous work) become less significant.

A final indicator of progress in the realm of graduate-level community engagement that is relevant to our present discussion is revealed in a recent study examining dissertations in the United States from 2001 to 2011 (*Jaeger, Tuchmayer, & Morin, 2014*). The study demonstrated steady growth of engaged scholarship in doctoral research beginning in 2006, identified the fields of study (education and public health) and institutions (e.g., Portland State University) that have been most prolific in producing engaged dissertations, and highlighted the successful use of diverse methodological approaches to the study of community problems.

Overall, Jaeger et al.'s work lays an important foundation for further research on the prevalence of community engagement in graduate programs, effective strategies for advising and socializing emerging engagement scholars, and best practices for engaged scholarship that might be transferable to different fields of study. In turn, increased knowledge in these areas will make possible increasingly productive exchanges between faculty and doctoral students "about transforming doctoral education to include engagement" (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 20).

In closing, let us be clear in saying that we have not yet arrived at a time and place where community engagement is sufficiently valued and rewarded within higher education. To be sure, many of the recommendations we put forth in 2006 remain relevant today. For example, in order to advance engaged scholarship at the graduate level, we must do more to assess educational outcomes associated with its integration in various graduate programs. We must also continually seek innovative ways to embed community engagement within disciplines that face the greatest barriers to participation. Finally, we must be vigilant in our efforts to foster institutional and faculty cultures that will welcome a new generation of scholars that is committed to tackling the most pressing societal problems of our day. Though there is still much work to be done, it is important to occasionally pause and take stock of all that has been accomplished thus far in the community engagement movement. We have enjoyed this unique opportunity to reflect on the victories that have lately been achieved in support of graduate-level community engagement and expect that the coming decade will similarly be characterized by continued and substantive progress toward these goals.

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