

# (Re)imagining Graduate Education Professional Development Spaces for Community-Engaged Practitioner-Scholars

## *Dissertation Overview*

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### **Abstract**

This basic, exploratory qualitative dissertation study (Van Schyndel, 2022) examined professional identity development of community-engaged practitioner-scholars through their participation in a U.S.-based community engagement professional association's graduate student fellowship program. Semistructured interviews with 15 program alumni revealed six common themes grouped into two sections. "The people" focused on participants' backgrounds and ways of work, and "the setting" focused on participants' experiences of tension within the academy and their development of new conceptualizations, new relationships, and new practices through the fellowship program. Findings suggested that program participation was critical to not only their ongoing professional identity development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, but also their ability to persist through graduation in the face of challenging higher education environments. Professional associations can provide an alternate setting to what graduate students may experience inside the academy, especially by offering programs designed with principles of relationship-building, community, wellness, and inclusion. Additional recommendations and implications for practice are included.

*Keywords: graduate education, community engagement, professional identity, professional association, fellowship program*



**I**n grounding this dissertation study, it is important to know a few things about me. First, in addition to being a recent doctoral degree recipient, I was also recently the membership director for Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a national community engagement professional association in the United States. I have held leadership roles in two other community engagement professional associations—Campus Compact and the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE)—and I have worked as a staff member in several university-community engagement offices in the U.S. Through both my academic and professional journey over the past decade, I have embraced and found a lot of joy in being a scholar, as well as a practitioner, in the community engagement field. Yet I would be remiss to not also acknowledge my whole personhood. During my graduate studies in particular, being a friend, a neighbor, a daughter, a sister, and a proud aunt to a niece and nephew have been really important parts of my life. Additionally, I come from a family of mostly educators, farmers, and health care workers whose legacy is one of commitment to caring for others. Being surrounded by these individuals as professional and personal examples, especially my mother, who was a professor of nursing with a focus on community health, has had an inordinate amount of influence on my life journey.

Second, during my graduate studies my experiences with IARSLCE and its Graduate Student Network transformed my research. I was part of a group of scholars who conducted a collaborative autoethnographic research study (Kniffin et al., 2021) that showed commonalities across our individual graduate student stories regarding our professional motivations, experiences, and resulting outcomes related to holding the role of the chair of the IARSLCE Graduate Student Network. One of the related commonalities from this study was a lack of support for the emerging identities and practices of community-engaged practitioner-scholars at higher education institutions and/or within graduate programs. I should also note that those institutions or programs did not always actively oppose community engagement; rather, these students needed to seek out support, resources, and community elsewhere. The second commonality was finding support for emerging identities and practices through involvement with the association and its graduate student network. Two primary areas of support emerged: (a) professional development opportunities and (b) strong relationships through a network of peers and mentors. The experience and knowledge I gained throughout this collaborative research process led me to wonder about the experiences of graduate students highly involved in other community engagement professional associations. How were those graduate students connecting to professional development opportunities and professionals in the field of community engagement? How were these opportunities and connections supporting their emerging identities around community engagement?

These are the personal, academic, and professional experiences and resulting questions that inspired this dissertation research, which explored how a professional identity as a community-engaged practitioner-scholar is fostered through participation in professional associations while in graduate school.

## Background

Within higher education institutions, conversations about institutionalizing community engagement are ongoing. Increased institutionalization of community engagement already occurs through the establishment of centers and the creation of professional staff roles; the inclusion of community engagement in mission statements, presi-

dential statements, and strategic planning (Welch, 2016); and national recognition of community engagement through the Carnegie Community Engagement classification (American Council on Education, n.d.). Some scholars argue that socialization of graduate students toward community-engaged work is an essential component to continued institutionalization of community engagement (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Sandmann et al., 2008; Stanton, 2008).

Further, there are ongoing efforts to professionalize the field of community engagement. Not only have multiple professional associations focused on community engagement existed for several decades (e.g., Campus Compact, the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*), but in the last decade there have been efforts to determine necessary professional competencies for community engagement. Some of those efforts are aimed at graduate students (Doberneck et al., 2017), and others are aimed at scholar-practitioners more broadly (Dostilio, 2017). Additionally, Campus Compact (n.d.) offers credentials for what it considers to be core community engagement competencies.

Finally, recent scholarship focuses on the experiences of community-engaged graduate students, primarily within higher education institutions or graduate programs. Such experiences include their advising or dissertation experiences (Jaeger et al., 2011, 2014), participation in service-learning or community-engaged coursework (Dinour et al., 2018; Lu & Lambright, 2010; McDonough et al., 2017), outreach education opportunities as a substitute for teaching assistantships (Laursen et al., 2012), graduate certificate programs (Matthews et al., 2015), and institutional learning communities (Mathis et al., 2016). Despite progress on embedding community engagement within the fabric of graduate education in an institutional setting, the best way to orient and train graduate students to be community-engaged practitioner-scholars is still relatively new territory for the community engagement field.

Regarding graduate student learning and experiences within community engagement professional associations, although these spaces are mentioned in reflective scholarship (Gilvin et al., 2012; Post et al., 2016),

only Kniffin et al. (2021) have published research on the experiences of community-engaged graduate students within professional associations. More research on this topic is needed to better understand the full range of factors and spaces that may play a role in influencing graduate students to claim community-engaged identities and pursue community-engaged work after graduation.

There are a variety of ways to examine professional identity development. Through the concept of socialization, we can begin to understand graduate student professional identity development through participation in a myriad of spaces. According to the model of graduate student socialization initially developed by Weidman et al. (2001), socialization represents “the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills” (p. iii). It also posits that this “entry” includes adoption of a professional identity and that socialization happens across different dimensions of the graduate student experience, including in graduate school programs and higher education institutions, as well as professional and personal communities.

Since Weidman et al.’s model was initially published in 2001, multiple researchers have tested it and offered useful critiques. In a revised version of the model (published after data collection and analysis for this dissertation study took place), Weidman and DeAngelo (2020) highlighted research studies that interrogated certain model areas, like identity, as well as areas that remain underexplored within the model, like professional communities. These critiques demonstrate that socialization toward a particular professional identity, specifically through professional associations as a type of professional community, remains an underexplored area of research. This dissertation study contributes to growing this body of research and to understanding if and how professional associations may factor into graduate student socialization toward community engagement.

### Research Design and Methods

This dissertation study was a basic, exploratory qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that examined professional identity development of community-engaged

practitioner-scholars through participation in a community engagement professional association’s graduate student fellowship—the Imagining America (IA) Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows program. I used this guiding research question: How does participation in a graduate fellows program offered by a community engagement professional association contribute to the professional identity development of a community-engaged practitioner-scholar? The Michigan State University Institutional Review Board approved the study prior to the onset of research.

Data collection occurred through semistructured interviews with 15 PAGE Fellows program alumni who self-identified as community-engaged scholar-practitioners and participated in the fellowship between 2008 and 2017. At the time of their participation in the PAGE program, just over two thirds of participants were doctoral students, and the remaining participants were master’s students. Participants were enrolled in disciplinary graduate programs in the arts, education, humanities, and social sciences, as well as interdisciplinary graduate programs like American studies, ethnic studies, and liberal arts. At the time they were interviewed, participants’ professional titles included artist, curator, director/manager, fellow, founder, professor/instructor, and scholar. A little over half of participants worked in or adjacent to higher education institutions in units such as academic centers or departments, libraries, and museums. The remaining participants were located outside higher education institutions in associations, entrepreneurial pursuits, and software startups.

Data analysis was completed through thematic analysis of interview transcriptions, using an inductive rather than a deductive approach to make meaning from the data. The first coding cycle used an initial coding (i.e., open coding) and categorization process (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 115–119) focused on being open to any discrete codes and categories that emerged from the data. However, multiple participants questioned or chose not to separate out their professional identity and work from other aspects of their identity and lives. Therefore, informed by the first round of coding, the second round of coding used a more holistic approach—one less focused on breaking apart interviews into discrete codes. The second coding cycle used a process of

theming the data (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 198–204) focused on identifying “big ideas” across interviews that brought discrete codes into a more meaningful whole and led to identification of broader overarching themes. From this two-step process six major themes emerged, which were then divided into two findings sections.

## Findings

The first section, the people, focused on two themes: *backgrounds* of participants and their *ways of work* as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Backgrounds highlighted significant aspects of participant backgrounds that they chose to share and felt were key to understanding their professional identities and work. These backgrounds were often deeply intertwined with their values and motivations for their work. Ways of work highlighted the varied ways participants described and talked about their current professional identities and work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

The second section, the setting, focused on four additional themes: *Tension within the academy*, *new conceptualizations*, *new relationships*, and *new practices*. Tension within the academy highlighted the challenges community-engaged practitioner-scholars faced within academia, both as graduate students and as recent graduates. The remaining three themes demonstrated how the PAGE program provided a necessary space for these community-engaged practitioner-scholars to move forward in their emerging identity development, despite these challenges, through the development of new conceptualizations, new relationships, and new practices.

### The People

I wonder if there are probably privileges in being able to separate your personal and your professional. Who gets to do that? And who wants to do that? What's the value? What's the risk? What are some unintended consequences of separating them or not? What kind of emotional energy and labor goes into separating them or not? What structures at play in our institutions force us to separate them or not? How do spaces feel when you separate them or not? (Jane)

The decision to frame the findings by dividing the six themes into two sections was inspired by Jane—a study participant. (This dissertation overview includes quotes from one participant; see the full dissertation for additional participant quotes.) Jane wondered about the separation of aspects of identity, specifically separating the personal from the professional, and whether doing so is a privilege experienced only by White individuals. Although this study did not seek to examine the questions Jane posed or connections between personal and social identities and professional identity, these connections clearly emerged from the data. Reflection on the questions Jane posed in her interview led to a first section focused on the people in the study and rich descriptions of study participants that more fully illustrate their multiple identities, characteristics, and life experiences, as well as their professional work and roles.

### Backgrounds

Participants' backgrounds, including unique personal and social identities, characteristics, and life experiences, were intricately intertwined from childhood to adulthood. Identities and characteristics that emerged from participant interviews included gender, nationality/culture, race/ethnicity, class, religion, first-generation college student status, and parental or relationship status. Participant life experiences included geographical locations, familial relationships, educational settings, world events, and experiences with privilege and marginalization. Although each participant claimed distinct identities, characteristics, and life experiences, they nonetheless developed and shared similar values and motivations to become community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Regardless of their degree type, graduate program, or discipline, these backgrounds, values, and motivations wove their way into participants' graduate school experiences and future professional roles and careers.

### Ways of Work

The complexity of participants' identities, characteristics, and life experiences mirrored the complexity of how they described their identities and work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Participants utilized different language (civic, community, activist, public, etc.) and narratives (i.e., when with community engagement colleagues vs. disciplinary colleagues) to describe their work. Yet they also found



common ground in how their work spanned multiple boundaries (e.g., between the university and community or across disciplines and methods) as it imagined and drove forward a more equitable and just world.

### **The Setting: Higher Education Institutions**

PAGE Fellows just gave me these beautiful examples of scholars who are trying new things and stepping outside of their disciplinary perspectives and being really attached to their neighborhoods, their home communities, their communities that they made these genuine connections with. They're all doing leadership while they were facing a lot of resistance from their peers or from their institution, from faculty advisors. And doing it anyway. (Jane)

Although no interview questions specifically addressed challenges to their emerging identity development, most participants spoke to the challenge of finding supportive spaces for their emerging professional identities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Participants, including Jane, specifically named different aspects of and experiences within the academy as unsupportive, which led to the decision to provide rich descriptions of these tensions before addressing participants' experiences with the PAGE program.

### ***Tension Within the Academy***

As participants described not only their current professional roles, but also their journeys into those roles from graduate school onward, many stories of tension within the academy emerged. Participants found their emerging identities, including the values and motivations behind those identities, out of alignment with the values and norms of higher education institutions. During their graduate studies, most often these tensions were within academic programs, departments, and even the broader institution that did not support and sometimes directly challenged the emerging community-engaged practitioner-scholar identities of participants. Similar tensions emerged during job searches, both from within their graduate institution (e.g., advisors) and from institutions to which they were applying (e.g., search committees). For those who chose to work in academia, tensions remained evident once they were employed and on an academic career path toward promotion and tenure.

### **The Setting: IA PAGE Fellows Program**

My first civic memory that really motivated me to want to be in community engagement practices stemmed from my mom . . . at a young age I saw her resistance and her really creative tactics. . . . One of my [other] motivations I would say is really my dad. . . . my mom always brought the head, and my dad brought the hands. I can also see in him so much heart. I really strive in my teaching and in my personal life to try to align the head, heart, and hands. (Jane)

Jane used the metaphor of aligning head, heart, and hands to describe how her family was one factor that shaped her development as a community-engaged practitioner-scholar. She also noted a strong connection between her past familial relationships and experiences, the values and perspectives she holds, and the professional choices she makes. This metaphor and way of thinking was in line with how other study participants described their own development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars and how some even referred to the PAGE program as a family. Reflection on this metaphor led to a second section focused on rich descriptions of participants' experiences with the PAGE program and IA and framed these experiences through the development of new conceptualizations (i.e., revelations of the mind—or head), new relationships (i.e., affirmations of the heart), and new practices in their work (i.e., transformations of the hands).

### ***New Conceptualizations***

Participants pointed to the PAGE program and the broader IA network as places where they examined tensions within the academy and emerged with a variety of new professional conceptualizations. Participants realized that there were others inside and outside academia working to reimagine higher education and community engagement. They also observed how arts-based and/or justice-oriented approaches to community engagement could be incorporated into their community-engaged work. Participants then began shifting their own mindsets and moving toward more integrated professional identities and ways of work that embraced community engagement within their research, teaching, or other practice. This movement included developing and

utilizing new vocabulary and narratives around their work. As a result of these shifts and embraces, participants felt more confidence to consider new future professional possibilities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

### ***New Relationships***

At the same time as participants were examining these tensions and developing new individual conceptualizations of themselves, many were also developing new relationships. They found people within the PAGE program and the broader IA network to whom they related in ways they could not relate to others in their existing professional networks. In finding these people, participants were able to start conversations about their work from a different place, less focused on explaining and justifying their efforts and more focused on understanding and affirming their work. As they developed these new relationships, participants discovered that the relationships felt more compassionate, familial, and relational versus competitive, individualistic, and transactional. Through these types of affirming relationships, participants felt supported and sought to collectively construct professional development opportunities for their emerging identities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

### ***New Practices***

Finally, because of their individual and collective development, participants both experienced and developed a set of new practices as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. The PAGE program and the broader IA network were spaces where participants were inspired to make and be the change they wanted to see in the world and in academia, including by supporting future community-engaged graduate students. This inspiration also sparked new ways of thinking, being, and doing, especially more interdisciplinary and arts-based approaches to their work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Additionally, participants also experienced greater alignment not just in their paid jobs, but also in their life purpose.

## **Discussion**

I showed up to the [PAGE] summit, and . . . I had just come from caregiving for my dad for the weekend. I missed multiple dissertation deadlines, and I was just not feeling good.

Couldn't sleep the night before. I just was not feeling confident, and here I was in this academic space. I'm like, "Great, another reason I have to perform today." We were going around for introductions. It got to me, and I just started crying. I couldn't even get it out, and I said, "Come back to me. I just need a little bit of time." I had never done that before. It was so embarrassing, but I couldn't hold it in. Then we kept going around the circle, and it got to [another fellow]. He started off and said, "I want to share this Adrienne Rich quote, 'There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors.'" Then he proceeded with his introduction. I just felt instantly drawn to this human and felt this sense of relief about what had just happened, as opposed to shame for not performing my academic self or my professional self in that space. [The fellow who shared that quote] described it as radical care. . . . I felt that instantly when he said that quote. Then that carried forth with me—a space where you can care for people where they're at and yes, carry forward supporting their public engagements, identities, projects and scholarship, and career paths, but it's caring first and foremost for each other as humans. (Jane)

This story shared by Jane reflects the power of the PAGE program in participants' professional and personal journeys. The PAGE alumni who took part in this study were diverse in terms of identities, characteristics, and life experiences. Similarly, the way they named and went about their current work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars also varied. However, their values and motivations were similar and accompanied them on their journeys through graduate education, including the PAGE program, and into their future professional roles as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

Participants also shared the experience of challenging higher education institutional environments due to their unique identities, characteristics, experiences, values, and motivations as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. They brought those challenges into the spaces of the PAGE pro-

gram and the broader IA network. Rather than finding additional tension, they found the opposite—a community that recognized their challenges and actively worked to address them through reimagining higher education and community engagement. They also found an affirming community where they could collectively work to provide a supportive space to further explore and learn new ways of knowing, doing, and being that embraced community-engaged identities and work.

As part of participants' professional and personal journeys, IA and the PAGE program provided necessary spaces for them to acknowledge a lack of alignment of their head, heart, and hands with the values and structures of the academy and to move toward greater alignment through new conceptualizations, relationships, and practices developed through participation in the PAGE program. After participating in the PAGE program, participants felt more confident embracing new community-oriented aspects of their identity and work, more motivated to expand the scope of their community-engaged work, and more driven to pursue community-engaged roles and create similar spaces for others interested in this type of work. These spaces were critical not only to participants' ongoing professional identity development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, but also to their ability to persist through graduation in the face of challenging higher education environments. Just as importantly, these spaces were also critical to their survival and growth as human beings.

Although socialization (Weidman et al., 2001) toward community engagement (i.e., networking and mentoring) did occur through IA and the PAGE program, the fellowship setting also focused on graduate student well-being and inclusion and functioned in a way similar to counterspaces (Case & Hunter, 2012). The framework of counterspaces provides an avenue for "thinking critically about and investigating how settings—and the transactional processes that unfold within them—are associated with the promotion of psychological wellness for various marginalized populations" (Case & Hunter, 2012, Abstract). Additionally, IA and PAGE focused on building relationships and graduate student professional development in community with one another, similar

to how communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) function. The framework of communities of practice points to social learning as "the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are" (Wenger, 1998, Abstract). Although socialization is a commonly used lens to understand graduate student professional identity development, communities of practice and counterspaces are other lenses that provide additional understanding of community-engaged graduate students' experiences and identity development through relational and communal professional development settings like the PAGE Fellows program. In particular, the lens of counterspaces points to the importance of relational and communal professional development spaces that both acknowledge harm and promote healing. When rhetoric does not match reality for higher education institutions' commitment to community engagement, community-engaged practitioner-scholars may find that relational and communal counterspaces to the academy are necessary. These spaces allow them to reset and reframe, collectively organize, and push back against normative socialization processes of the academy that do not acknowledge or encourage them to embrace their complex, multifaceted identities, values, and motivations and that pose a challenge to their well-being.

### Limitations

This study focused on one professional association (IA) and specific professional development program for graduate students within that professional association (the PAGE program). Other community engagement professional associations offer professional development for graduate students, but those programs were outside the scope of this study. Eligibility for the PAGE program is limited to graduate students who study at IA member institutions, which are all U.S.-based institutions, so the study sample was limited to students studying at U.S.-based, IA member higher education institutions. In line with the focus of IA, the PAGE program primarily supports graduate students whose work and/or graduate programs are in the arts, humanities, and design fields, so the study sample did not represent the full diversity of graduate programs, academic disciplines, or professional roles. Therefore, results are not generalizable to all graduate students or all professional associations.

## Implications

This study offers several key takeaways for consideration by both scholars and practitioners with regard to professional development via professional associations for graduate students who identify as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. These takeaways also have relevance to research or practice associated with community engagement associations, programs for emerging community-engaged practitioner-scholars, and other learning environments outside community engagement, higher education, or professional associations where individuals are experiencing professional marginalization. For one example, see Van Schyndel's (2023) publication, *Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Fellowship Development: Including Community Engagement and the Arts and Humanities*, which translates these research findings into recommendations for how others might create similar fellowship programs focusing on graduate education and professional development inclusive of methods of community engagement and of the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences.

## Recommendations

1. Individuals must be treated like whole people, beyond just a professional or academic being, to truly understand any aspect of their experiences. Doing so is particularly fundamental to creating supportive spaces, communities, programs, or policies for graduate students with an interest in community engagement.
2. Those supporting the professional development of community-engaged practitioner-scholars must be prepared and open to considering the layered identities, characteristics, and experiences of these individuals, as well as the related and complex values and motivations behind the work these individuals do. They must also acknowledge that the work of community engagement is often complicated and messy, which can add an additional layer of complexity to graduate studies that include a focus on community engagement.
3. Learning and development experiences, within both higher education and professional associations, must not only acknowledge personal identities, characteristics, experiences, values,

motivations, and professional desires and realities, but also encourage graduate students to draw upon them as they explore and grow into new professional roles and community-engaged work.

4. Many higher education institutions do not support whole-person development as just described, so it is important to acknowledge that graduate students interested in community engagement may be experiencing marginalization on multiple levels during their graduate studies, including as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.
5. However, graduate students may also find spaces of resistance to marginalization through participation in professional or personal communities. Professional development spaces like IA and the PAGE program can have a deeply positive impact on graduate students and their professional identities and practices as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. The higher education and community engagement fields must work toward creating more of these kinds of spaces, educating faculty and staff about these spaces, and developing centralized hubs of resources for graduate students seeking this kind of additional support.

## Conclusion

To support sustained well-being and professional development of boundary spanners (Van Schyndel et al., 2019; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) in graduate education who view themselves as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, we must look to successful professional development examples in many educational settings, including outside graduate school programs—especially as academia has the potential to harm, as well as benefit, graduate students. Professional communities, such as professional associations, can provide an alternate setting to what graduate students may experience inside the academy, especially when offering graduate student programs designed with principles of relationship-building, community, wellness, and inclusion in mind. Graduate student professional development offered by professional associations must go beyond invitations to networking and mentoring opportunities. It must build relational communities of individuals with commitments to being inclusive of the wide range of identities, characteristics, and



backgrounds they encompass. Spaces where individuals are encouraged and supported to bring their whole selves to this work *and* to push back against norms of academia that go against their values and motivations as community-engaged practitioner-scholars will help pave the way toward a more just and inclusive future for the field and greater well-being for community-engaged practitioner-scholars. This exploratory study shares an example of one such space, IA's PAGE Fellows program, and calls on future researchers to examine a greater diversity of graduate students and organizational contexts that similarly set graduate students up for success as professionals and human beings.



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