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Building Community in Adult Education Graduate Programs

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the opportunities and challenges of launching a graduate student seminar series in order to build community and information-sharing networks. We share successful program strategies and findings based on experience and a mixed methods study.

Problem, Purpose, and Background

Interacting with a community of peers, faculty, and administrators supports graduate students learning about the field, building strategies for academic and professional success, and coping with challenging workloads (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Luna & Cullen, 1998). We propose this interaction is an essential component of the graduate education experience. Many adult education graduate students are non-traditional, work full-time, or study from a distance; thus, building community in adult education graduate programs must be intentional rather than incidental.

Two graduate students at a major research university recognized the need for community building and information-sharing within the adult education program and organized a seminar series to address the perceived need. In planning the seminars, organizers needed to consider a number of factors, such as the timing of events, creating interesting and relevant events, and engaging students at a personal level to build supportive and sustainable relationships. Topics were chosen based on potential broad interest for all adult education students. An additional goal was to incorporate the future needs of new students and draw upon the experience of more advanced students.

The purpose of the study was to explore building community in adult education graduate programs. Research questions included (a) What community building strategies are most effective for students? and (b) How do students perceive the roles of peers, faculty, and administrators in community building?

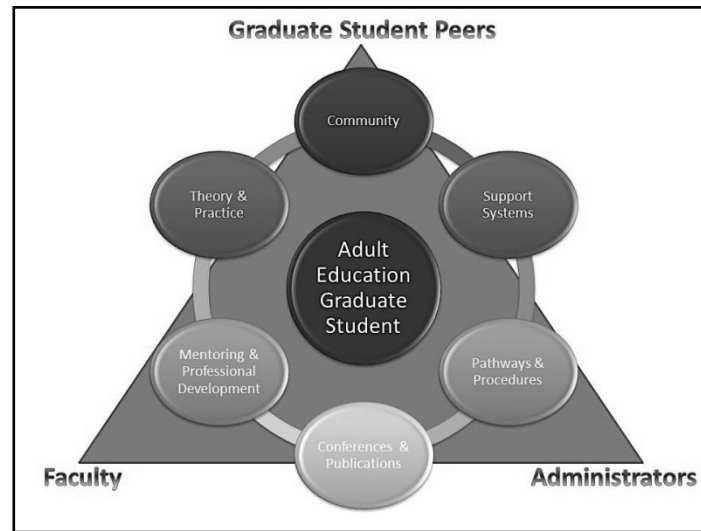
Methodology and Method

In order to assess the effectiveness of the seminar series, a mixed methods study was conducted. Data collection included seminar participants' feedback, the organizers' self-evaluations of organizing and reflections on participation, and a first year graduate student's feedback and reflections. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding.

Findings and Model of Building Community in Adult Education Programs

The participants and organizers identified building community as the most valuable seminar series outcome. This was achieved through purposeful community-building activities and informal interactions between students before and after the seminars. In addition, the seminars met the group's need for academic support. This was achieved through careful topic selection and providing participants with practical advice from more experienced students, faculty, and administrators. The following model

of building community in adult education programs depicts the interaction between the community, topics, and roles:



The organizers learned a number of lessons, which may be useful to organizers at other universities considering similar programs. For example, the graduate student organizers were surprised by the amount of time it took to coordinate each seminar and, therefore, recommend two student coordinators. The organizers also discovered value in having student organizers, rather than faculty members, due to the students' ability to identify students' needs and interests and balance faculty and administrators' time constraints. Utilizing the seminars to convey important information to all students at once, rather than through individual advising or mentoring appointments, was a more efficient use of faculty and administrators' time.

Although the sessions were successful and beneficial, the organizers faced challenges. For example, attendance was low among first year graduate students and those approaching graduation. Selected topics were focused more toward students completing coursework. One strategy to increase the involvement of more experienced students was to invite them to lead a seminar, allowing them to benefit from the community building while sharing their experience. Additional strategies are needed to increase first-year student involvement. Another challenge is increasing remote student involvement. Remote students participated in one session via a conference call, but found it difficult to hear all of the conversation and information. The organizers plan to explore better methods to involve remote students.

Implications for Practice

This study explored and contributes to the practice of building community in adult education graduate programs. Furthermore, the intent of the roundtable is to share and discuss the research findings, including challenges and strategies for success. The facilitators wish to solicit participant discussion and feedback, contributing to future practice.

References

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