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Developing Engaged Scholars: The Graduate Advisor-Advisee Relationship

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Abstract: *A critical dimension in the development of emerging engaged scholars is the advisor-advisee relationship. A multiyear, multiuniversity study of doctoral students interested in community-engaged scholarship and their advisors found that advisors influenced their advisees' specific approach to community engagement; advisees built extensively on their own community-based experiences and even pushed their advisors in co-learning about community-engaged scholarship; and advisors and advisees shared recognition of lack of support for community engagement but pursued it anyway.*

Faculty as Engaged Scholars

Scholars are being called to reframe their conventional understanding of teaching, research, and service in the academy in a “scholarship of engagement” that builds on ideas formulated by Ernest Boyer (1990, 1996). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2008) defines community engagement as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities ... for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” Engaged scholarship is often represented by work done within Stokes’s (1997) “Pasteur’s Quadrant”: that is, doing use-inspired research, building on basic research while improving practice.

Although the philosophical, theoretical, and practical dimensions of this movement seem consistent with a social justice mission, many disciplines have contributed little to the theory and practice of scholarly engagement. This lack of involvement in the face of increasing recognition and legitimacy for community-engaged learning in higher education indicates the need for a cadre of faculty members with the knowledge and skills required to participate in engaged scholarship. In this context, there is increasing recognition of the importance of future faculty: graduate students (Applegate, 2002; Bloomfield, 2006; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2007), who are being socialized to the academic career (Austin, 2002). However, established professional development mechanisms or pathways are lacking for graduate students and faculty members who seek community-engaged careers in the academy. Further, faculty members who are not themselves community-engaged often misunderstand or misrepresent community-engaged scholarship. This can dissuade graduate students and other faculty from seriously considering community-engaged academic careers.

Thus we focused on this period when graduate students are learning what society expects of faculty and how to apply their research to society. We examined how they become educated as community-engaged scholars and what factors could provide insight for faculty to recognize the importance and implement the practice of community-engaged scholarship.

Purpose of Research

Our research sought to investigate one critical dimension of the development of emerging engaged scholars or future faculty: the relationship of doctoral students interested in community-engaged scholarship and their advisors. Specifically, we examined how an advisor's perception of engaged scholarship shapes and influences the scholarship and practice of advisees. The study also explored what factors influence the scholarship and practice of advisees (mentors, coursework, literature, personal and career goals, peers and classmates).

Theoretical Framework

Among the factors that influence graduate students' academic development and learning experiences, such as collegiality and curriculum, research has consistently shown that advising is one of the most significant variables associated with academic success (Anderson, Oju, & Falkner, 2001; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Golde, 1998; Haworth & Bair, 2000; Malaney, 1988; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). Golde (1998) interviewed 58 doctoral dropouts and found that difficult relationships with advisors were one factor underlying dropouts. Haworth and Bair (2000) identified five learning and teaching practices that contribute significantly to graduate students' intellectual development: for instance, individualized mentoring. However, given the significance of advising in graduate education, it is pointed out that "graduate students do not receive focused, regular feedback or mentoring" (Austin, 2002, p. 113). Further research explores *how* advising influences graduate students' professional development (Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, 2008; Schlosser & Gelso, 2005; Schlosser & Kahn, 2007; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004).

However, the literatures on both the significance of advising and the advisor-advisee relationship are not robust; most research notes the lack of empirical study. Little study has focused on how advisors' perspective influences their academic practice, and no literature was found regarding advisor-advisee relationships with respect to community engagement.

Methodology and Data Collection

An interpretive qualitative research design was selected for this study because it allowed for deeper understanding and examination of ways doctoral advisors and their advisees learn about and practice community-engaged scholarship. This exploratory work employs a multicase study design (Yin, 2001) to compare patterns of engagement knowing and activity of the individuals and across the advisor and advisee groups.

The subjects for this study were three matched pairs of doctoral graduate students and their faculty advisors from three large research-extensive universities that purposively support scholarly engagement activity. These doctoral students and their advisors had been selected for the Houle Engaged Scholars, an 18-month pilot program intended to build a pipeline of engaged scholars (Sandmann, 2008). Specific selection criteria included: interest in community-based, community-collaborative scholarship and commitment by the graduate student to an engaged scholarship dissertation. No specific disciplines or other demographic characteristics were sought.

We conducted individual one-hour semistructured interviews of all 6 participants. Most interviews were in person; one was over the phone. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was collected during January and February 2009.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998) was used to analyze themes within and across cases and case types. The three researchers independently read all the cases and developed individual profiles of all 6 cases as well as composite profiles and themes for each of the groups—the advisors and the advisees. Specifically, we searched our initial data for regularities, patterns, and general topics. Then we recorded words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns and assigned codes. Lastly, we discussed, compared, and combined our analysis for triangulated results (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Data Sources

The three advisor-advisee pairs came from diverse disciplines—adult education, communications, and public administration. The profiles of the respective groups provide insight into who is involved in engaged scholarship and specifically what they are doing.

Advisors

All three faculty members were tenured associate professors with a strong community-engagement orientation and deep commitment to mentoring graduate students, but varying levels of departmental support for their work. Overall, advisors believe a stronger mentor relationship is needed since engagement tends to be more time-consuming than other academic work and to yield different scholarly outputs.

Advisors gave multiple reasons for involving students, including feeling a responsibility to help students succeed, or simply considering it the responsibility of a scholar. Advisors identified very few structural supports for students conducting community-engaged research. They all acknowledged the challenges, including time, finances (resources), and projects themselves (dynamics of the relationships).

Advisors acknowledged promotion and tenure issues but did not use them as an excuse. They navigated the process by having different products or being internally motivated or having clear expectations with colleagues and department chairs.

Advisees

The advanced-standing doctoral students were all in or near the candidacy stage. Interestingly, they all share a previous connection with the community. They believed that you learn about this work by doing it and collaborating with others. Support for the work, particularly a lack of financial support, was a challenge, as were differences in goals and needs of the community and of the university. They acknowledged the lack of structural support or recognition and the amount of time community-engaged scholarship took. They believed such work requires communication skills, knowledge about communities (“honor local wisdom”), and willingness to explore new areas.

Findings and Results

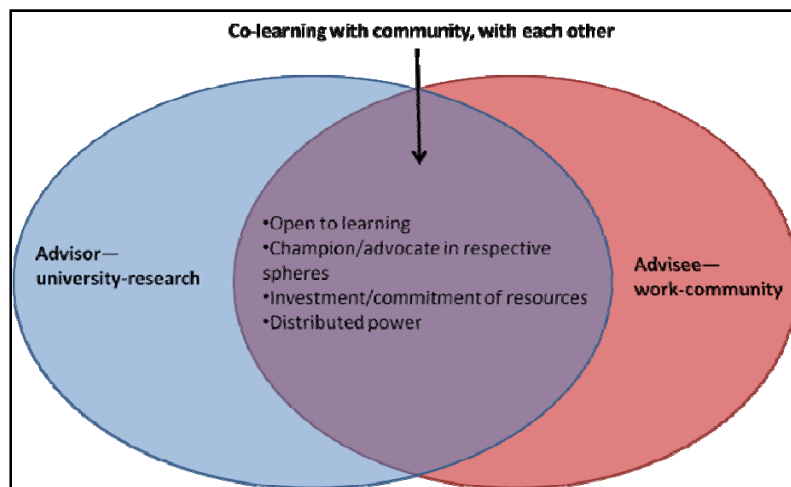
Data analysis revealed the following themes:

- Since all the advisees had significant work experience, their backgrounds make them predisposed to engaged scholarship. Their research approach was value driven, as

indicated by their statements about “honoring local wisdom and positionality” or acting with a sense of “altruism and a giving back to community.” They also had a penchant for working as part of a research team versus having a “secluded, silent experience.” They saw less relevance in their general graduate coursework and more in the theory and practice of doing formal research, particularly exposure to newer and more complex research methods.

- Advisees built extensively on their own community-based experiences and even pushed their advisors in co-learning about community-engaged scholarship. This dynamic is characterized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Engaged Scholar Advisor-Advisee Relationship



- The advisees’ approach to engaged scholarly work reflected their respective advisors’ influence. One student, consonant with his advisor, was more interested in the community and thus in understanding the challenging role of developing good relationships with the community. The other students, like their respective advisors, were concerned about connecting this work to their disciplines and navigating the challenges of doing the work.
- As engaged scholars themselves, the advisors know about and appreciate the capacities and demands needed in working with communities.
- Advisors work as sponsors, advocates, mediators, and interpreters for their advisees to other departmental faculty. They discuss “fit” between their disciplinary home and engagement. They often need to explain the nature of engaged scholarship, particularly the pacing of students working with communities, or advocate for support for students’ work.
- Both students and their advisors acknowledge a lack of structural support. Although apparently not a hindrance, this makes the work more difficult.
- Both groups manifested a mix of university/community centricity. Contributing to the public good was a common goal, but faculty talked more about how it would help their careers, whereas students, though committed, expressed more doubt about how it might hinder their career paths.

Conclusions

This study, consistent with the literature, confirms the high potential and need in the advisor/advisee relationship. The immediate benefits of such a relationship, exceeding those of coursework and peers, were clearly evident through these students and faculty. Advisees' perceptions of community engaged scholarship were highly influenced by the research and philosophical beliefs of their advisors. This is important to consider given that more advisees are coming to graduate school with experiences in community-engaged work.

New insights about future faculty are needed to advance engaged scholarship. Success rests on more than coming from an applied or professional disciplinary background, although the field may be more appealing to those with stronger civic or community perspectives. Similarly, potential in this field might be tied to personal epistemology: that is, do those who do engagement "see the world" and how people relate differently?

Of all the constraints to engaged scholarship for both the advisors and the advisees, time was most frequently mentioned. The difference between what we'd like to do and what we can do is not likely to change, particularly given the national economic situation, yet this circumstance will increase the need for community revitalization.

This small-scale exploratory study attests to the value of professional development opportunities for both emerging and existing community-engaged scholars to advance both theory and practice. Our results indicate that this topic is worthy of research on a larger scale.

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