

Chapter 4

Education, Community, and Social Engagement: Re-Imagining Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

In many higher education and student affairs graduate programs the responsibility for providing field-based learning often falls on the graduate assistantship. Programs often situate theoretical learning inside the classroom and practical engagement at the assistantship site. The growing urgency for educators to create transformative learning experiences and to integrate deep interactions with issues of social justice into the classroom challenges graduate faculty to re-evaluate their approach to teaching and learning. In this chapter, the author makes the case for adopting a creative, community-based, and culturally engaging approach to teaching in graduate education programs.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions regarding the importance and impact of pedagogical practice on student engagement, sense of inclusion and performance are often concentrated on the P-16 learning experience. Rich bodies of scholarship on culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally inclusive pedagogy, transformative education, and inclusive classrooms help instructors who facilitate learning in primary, secondary and undergraduate classrooms to transform their practice (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006; Django & Alim, 2017). Much of this research has significant relevance to the graduate classroom. However, scholarship that explores graduate education more often than not focuses on the challenges graduate students face navigating the larger institution. Historic vestiges of cultural imperialism are critiqued as tools of oppression and obstacles of inclusion. Topics such as graduate student isolation and the critical role of mentoring has been explored as important strategies to help graduate students navigate the tough and unwelcoming terrains of graduate school (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Bonilla, Pickron, & Tatum, 1994; Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2016; Lopez, n.d.; Gay, 2007).

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As Tuitt (2018) asserted, ethnically diverse communities in higher education (including undergrads, faculty, administrative and support staff, and graduate students) are all navigating plantation politics in higher education. There are indeed policies, practices, and traditions with long and historic roots that continue to disenfranchise certain populations on a college campus (Museus, 2011, 2014; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Tuitt, 2009; Jehangir, 2010; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2004). While important work has been done to name the problems of exclusion in undergraduate classrooms, in co-curricular student life, in residence halls and fraternity houses, the graduate classroom has not endured enough critique. The graduate classroom must be held accountable for its role in contributing to culturally exclusive experiences.

Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) noted that a thorough examination of issues of diversity and pedagogy and their relationship to faculty has been absent in the recent efforts to purposefully restructure graduate programs. Graduate classrooms, more than any other class environment on a college campus continue to be mired in long standing cultures that were born of patriarchal, white supremacist, classist and exclusive practices (Wilder, 2013; Tuitt, 2003). The ways in which the graduate experience and degree progression process continues to romanticize the traditionally white, male and upper-class historic academic process is problematic. These academic cultures, which we still emulate, are incredibly exclusive. To say it plainly, higher education institutions in the United States were not established to educate the many cultures that are now pursuing a college education. So why do we sustain these old cultures of the academy?

Undoubtedly some progress has been made, particularly regarding the foundational knowledge often taught in graduate programs. Many graduate programs in the field of education do push students to interact with strong, meaningful, difficult, and sometimes harsh facts, scholarship, and ideologies. While the content of many graduate programs is often rich in regards to the scholarship presented to students, the instructional methods have largely remained stagnant. Within most graduate programs, we find the usual suspects: required texts, journal articles, lectures, podcasts, webinars, group work, case studies, research papers, book reviews, electronic portfolios, interviews, discussion boards, and the occasional icebreaker, team building activity, campus event attendance, or experiment with social media. This is a wealthy list of teaching strategies, and they are all effective and important. Furthermore, most have been around for some time. I am not arguing to let go of these teaching strategies. Rather, I suggest that we elevate them through an engaged pedagogical approach (Tompkins, 2001; Gunzenhauser & Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). What if we designed an entire course to be rooted in engagement--not as one activity but as the focus of the course itself? What might learning look like if it was situated inside of the community being studied or if students were taught by actually experiencing the phenomenon themselves?

Of course, many faculty dare to innovate their instruction in new and exciting ways. Technology has pushed even the graduate classroom to evolve so that now we see some faculty introducing digital story assignments and social media engagement into their graduate courses. These practices do speak to the contemporary multi-media culture that spans the globe. It is an important advancement that will help colleges to effectively engage younger generations who are now moving through college and pursuing graduate degrees.

But there is an additional dimension of pedagogical practice that directly concerns issues of inclusivity, social justice, and belonging that must drive the transformation of graduate school instruction. Imagination, inspiration, and social action is missing. Many institutions do an outstanding job of complicating the undergraduate classroom to include civic engagement, community-based learning, education abroad, and project-based learning. Many undergraduate courses require hands-on interaction with real social

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