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The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, LWVWUXVWHHVRURIFUHWV.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Witte</td>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Boyte</td>
<td>Higher Education and the American Commonwealth Partnership: An Interview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Snyder-Hall</td>
<td>Tales from Anti-Civic U</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Minnich</td>
<td>Educating Democratically: An Interview</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley</td>
<td>Living Democracy: A Project for Students and Citizens</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen M. Knutson and Dan A. Lewis</td>
<td>Civic Engagement and Doctoral Education</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Hoecker</td>
<td>Public Scholarship at the Graduate Student Level</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wynne Wright</td>
<td>Wicked Bedfellows: Can Science and Democracy Coexist in the Land Grant?</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Hudson</td>
<td><em>What Is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education</em></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edited by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Mathews</td>
<td>Higher Education and Har Megiddo</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I remember opening the e-mail about the Graduate Engagement Opportunity (GEO). The first sentence read, “Spend spring quarter working for a community organization in the Chicago area while learning about the role of public intellectuals in civic life.” I flagged the message immediately, printed out the flier and pulled up the civic engagement Website to learn more. I remember thinking, “YES! This is what I have been missing!” At the time, I was halfway through my first year as a doctoral student in Media, Technology and Society at Northwestern University. Having returned to graduate school after years of professional experience as a journalist, I found myself missing a connection to the “real world.” I started to wonder if the academic path was right for me. The GEO program gave me a spark of hope that I could find a way to make graduate school fit my personality and my goals.

In many ways, I am the typical “millennial student” that Knutson and Lewis describe in their article in this volume. Born in 1980, I came up through a public education system that valued and encouraged volunteerism and service learning. Throughout high school and college, I spent many hours volunteering and working with organizations like Alternative Spring Break. So, I entered my PhD program with the expectation that I would be working, at some level, with the people affected by my research.

The GEO program appealed to me for many reasons. My long-term career goal is to become a professor and work at a university, so I wanted to better understand the role of higher education in society. Furthermore, in a new city with few familiar faces, I wanted to meet new people outside my own department. I craved “real world” interactions and wanted a chance to explore the bustling city of Chicago. But ultimately, I chose to participate

* The GEO program involves a seminar course about civic engagement in higher education and allows graduate students to work up to 32 hours a week in partnership with a local organization. For a more detailed description of the GEO program, please see the Knutson & Lewis article in this volume.
in GEO because I felt it would improve my research and enrich my time in graduate school. In all of these ways, the experience has been a great success.

With the help of the GEO staff, I arranged a partnership with the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. The museum—one-of-a-kind in the country and perhaps in the world—collects and displays artwork created by combat veterans. The museum fits perfectly with my research interests in visual communication and collective memory. Broadly speaking, I study how societies use visual media—including photography, art, comic books, and memorials—to remember and recover from conflicts. Having worked as a photojournalist, including a several-year stint at the military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, I am especially interested in how Americans learn about war, and how American veterans process their military experiences. The museum had been on my radar for years, and the GEO program offered the perfect opportunity to learn more about the museum, its collection, and its visitors.

**Contributions to Scholarship**

It might be tempting to see my work with the museum as a volunteer opportunity and nothing more. Some might view it as an internship program, and not a true scholarly endeavor. But, in my opinion, such an approach takes a very narrow perspective and overlooks the many ways in which such experiences contribute directly and indirectly towards research. Below are some of the ways I feel that the experience has contributed to my scholarship.

**Access to an Archive**

Through the museum, I gained access to an amazing collection of overlooked artwork and photographs. Cataloguing and digitizing the art, I became intimately familiar with the collection, including many pieces that were not on display at the museum or online. I also learned about other materials, such as a comic book series published about the Vietnam War. The museum had the comic books on site, which I studied as part of a collaborative project with another student. This project has led to several conference papers that we hope to publish.
Access to People

The museum connected me to three very important groups: artists, museum professionals, and veterans. Updating the artist files, I learned about the artists’ backgrounds and spoke with many of them about experiencing war, becoming veterans, and making art. Working at the register, I also chatted with visitors, including many military families, about why they come to the museum and how they interpret the art. Talking with both the artists and the visitors helped me think about the museum as a medium of communication.

Furthermore, knowing people in the local museum community helps keep me informed about upcoming exhibits, documentary films, and photography projects about war and its aftermath. I have made contacts at the local VA hospital, as well as other veterans’ organizations in the area. These are important professional contacts; we may become collaborators in the future. Furthermore, some have become my friends, which makes me feel more rooted in the Chicagoland community.

A Laboratory for Theory

For a recent qualifying exam in collective memory, I illustrated my arguments using examples from the museum. In her review of my essay, my professor wrote, “It is a comprehensive review of the literature; it points in a specific research direction and it includes a stream of examples, many from personal observations. Yours is one of the few student papers I read where the footnotes constituted a fascinating set of mini-pilot studies on their own.” By thinking through situations at the museum, I could better understand the theoretical concepts. Perhaps this will pave the way for my own theoretical contributions as I go forward. These real-world examples also provide great ideas for teaching.

Overall, my experience at the museum has proven to be remarkable—one that continues to provide benefits, both personal and professional. A year after the GEO program ended, I still spend about five hours per week at the museum.
Moving Forward: Public Scholarship

Despite my positive experience with the GEO program, there remain major obstacles that prevent other graduate students from participating in civic engagement programs. First, I believe there is a general misunderstanding of what civic engagement actually means. Too many scholars—both students and faculty—view it as an internship or a volunteer program, rather than something that contributes to the creation of knowledge. This creates a false choice between civic engagement and scholarship, as if it’s impossible to do both at the same time. As a result, many students and professors seem to view civic engagement as a threat to academic productivity. “It’ll take too much time away from my research” is a response I hear often when talking to other graduate students about the GEO program. In some cases, faculty members actively discourage students from participating because they believe it will “waste” time that could be otherwise spent working towards publication or applying for grants. I believe such advice stems from a genuine concern for their students. Professors want their students to be successful, and publishing is a major measure of that success. However, the two are not mutually exclusive. Civic engagement can lead to publications.

I have written at least five class papers related to the museum. I have already submitted two to national conferences; both have been accepted and I am currently reworking them for publication. I believe part of why they have been well received goes back to the fact that very little has been written in academic journals about this particular archive. The GEO program is what gave me access to these resources, and inspired me to write about them with passion.

Civic engagement can also help secure external funding, which is an equally important skill on the academic job market. Funders want to know that their money will make a difference and often require “broader impact” statements. What better way to understand the impact of your research than to build relationships with the community affected by it? Such hands-on experience, and the knowledge that results from such partnerships, helps researchers think about and articulate this broader purpose. Furthermore, national grant agencies are more likely to select interdisciplinary teams that are spread across multiple universities and geographic regions (Vashevko, et al). So it is important to get to know experts
in other fields and institutions. Programs like GEO, which bring together students from all corners of the university and professionals in the greater community, are important ways for students to build relationships outside of their department.

Overall, civic engagement offers many benefits to graduate students and faculty alike. As practitioners, we need to articulate more clearly what civic engagement is and how it can contribute towards scholarship. Perhaps we need to think about labeling. Personally, I have come to prefer the term “public scholarship.” As John Gastil pointed out in his 2007 article in this journal, the term emphasizes the word scholarship. This may help reinforce that such work contributes to, and doesn’t detract from, traditional academic values.

We also need to see more positive models of how civic engagement works, especially at the graduate student level. I believe I am one such example, and I am thankful to have the opportunity to share my experiences in this journal. If the goal of public scholarship is democracy (Cohen, 2006), then encouraging these values among graduate students is critical. Engaged graduate students become engaged professors, who in turn, help produce more engaged citizens.

REFERENCES


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