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.
<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>What Is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education</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>
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DOCTORAL EDUCATION
By Ellen M. Knutson and Dan A. Lewis

“GEO provided me with a space to really think about how my scholarship should consider the concerns of a society larger than academia and also consider the role my scholarship can play in affecting change.”

—GEO Participant

From Carnegie reports to conferences, as well as in the pages of the Chronicle of Higher Education, there has been much thought and debate about the future of the doctorate. At Northwestern University, we started an experiment in 2010, which we think has promise to reinvigorate doctoral education and contribute to the health of the communities that surround institutions of higher learning. Today's students are looking for ways to express and refine what citizenship means throughout their twenties and thirties, and they do not park their commitment to engagement at the door before they enter graduate school. Indeed, many have experienced service learning in college and even high school and are drawn to the doctorate as a way of translating the desire to change the world into a set of skills that are both marketable and useful for social change. However, too often graduate programs de-emphasize this goal in the quest to produce researchers. Students who have come to expect engaged learning as part and parcel of their education can be disappointed upon entering graduate school. When they find that engaged learning is not supported and work with community organizations may be thought of as peripheral, students can become disenchanted with graduate study. The more doctoral programs find a way to include engagement in their graduate training, the better prepared and more satisfied students will be. This can be done with a new course that moves across disciplines and leaves room for linking students’ interests with academically driven community involvement.

Beyond student interest and satisfaction, it is also no secret in the social sciences and humanities that there are, and will be, fewer academic jobs for people with doctorates in our top tier universities and colleges. Leaving aside the startling fact that most of these
universities are still admitting students to doctoral programs as if there were plenty of faculty jobs, recent graduates are finding the prospects rather bleak, and many are finding work outside the academy. Civic society is filled with opportunities for these students. We would like to see programming that prepares students to fill positions outside the academy and, equally important, learn the skills that could lead to productive partnerships between these institutions and engagement-oriented professors. This would mean academic programming that leads to the skill sets that are attractive to organizations, institutions, and groups outside the academy, as well as skill sets that would make for collaborations between such organizations and universities, such as working across differences and translating research findings into actionable plans.

These pressures, among others, have led us at the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE), to develop the Graduate Engagement Opportunities (GEO) Community Practicum program at Northwestern University, which forms the foundation of CCE commitment to the integration of academics with meaningful public service, research, and community partnerships. We began the program with four goals:

- to provide meaningful civic engagement practicums for doctoral students at Northwestern University;
- to support graduate students’ academic needs by promoting a scholarship of engagement;
- to create new career training opportunities for doctoral students;
- to strengthen ties between Northwestern University and area organizations.

The GEO Community Practicum provides interested graduate students with the opportunity to undertake a quarter-long practicum or field study in the overlapping areas of civic engagement, social justice, or community studies. Through the support of the Graduate School, PhD students are able to use a portion of their Northwestern funding to participate in this program. This means that
they keep their stipend and tuition scholarship while working with a community organization during one full academic quarter. The field study is combined with a credit-bearing seminar that encourages graduate students to reflect intellectually on civic engagement while actually engaging some dimension of civic life. Seminar topics include the role of higher education in democracy, the nature of public scholarship, and overview of various types of community-university partnerships. When appropriate, practicing public scholars are invited to discuss their work and career paths with the students and, as a group, the class makes at least one site visit to one of the host organizations during the course. The guest scholars and the site visit give the students a broader view of the civic life of Chicago and the surrounding area.

Through GEO, we support graduate students as they enhance their own academic experiences, while contributing to stronger communities and a more engaged university. Students are brought together in a multidisciplinary seminar to share the engagement experience with colleagues from across campus. The opportunity to build relationships with fellow doctoral students in other departments and schools allows them to gain deeper insights into the issues that surround university-community partnerships and the role of the university in a democracy. The four cohorts of students we have worked with represent eleven departments across four of Northwestern’s schools. This fall we added three new departments and one new school. As Robin Hoecker shares in the next article, this multidisciplinary experience is key to the GEO experience.

We hope to counter the trend documented by Doberneck et al. (2010) that graduate students disengage from public life, even when it was a vital part of their undergraduate education. The focus on engaged scholarship is important for doctoral education if for no other reason than to break the cycle of disengagement, especially within research universities, which ends with a disengaged professoriate or dropouts. In order for graduate students to become engaged scholars they must be trained to master additional competencies beyond their narrow disciplinary knowledge. They need to learn how to navigate the complex and often rocky terrain of community relationships and collaborative inquiry. Not only must students balance the needs of the community organization with the demands
and expectations placed upon them by the university and academic standards, they also must work collaboratively with diverse people and manage competing interests. They need to communicate effectively with multiple audiences (academics included) and trouble-shoot situations where there may be few preexisting solutions, or even agreement, on the nature of the problem. Thus, there is a learning and reflective component to our civic engagement program, so students can have a safe space in which to share challenges and successes and to discuss and practice the needed competencies.

Perhaps most importantly, civic engagement is not just an intellectual exercise; it is about action and what you are going to do in the world. It is imperative that students not just take a course in engagement, but practice it in the community. Moreover, the work that doctoral students engage in should not just be focused on service or volunteering. It should include elements of developing active citizens and engaging with the intellectual work required to address society’s most pressing problems. We focus on the students’ scholarship and actively connecting their academic knowledge to a public purpose. The placements for the students have been as diverse as the students themselves, and have included: developing and implementing training for youth workers at an after school program in one of Chicago’s most underserved neighborhoods; creating a civic engagement strategy and public programming plans for a proposed three-mile, elevated linear park and trail system; and writing white papers for a public employees’ union about proposed state policy changes. The placements were either directly related to the student’s research interests or helped to advance the student’s career goals. In many instances, it accomplished both. We encourage the students to embark on the road to public scholarship, and the training and support we give them leads to a civically engaged career path, either inside or outside of the academy.

We do encounter challenges in this program. However, our challenges are not new, nor particularly unique (see Battistoni 2002 for a list of typical challenges). Some faculty think of engagement as an add-on to doctoral education. Not all students received adequate support from faculty in their department. At Northwestern University, we do have the full support of the Graduate School. The backing of the Graduate School is an indication of potential cultural change.

It is imperative that students not just take a course in engagement, but practice it in the community.
within the institution. Additionally, there are faculty members and department heads that also support the program. Cultural change does not happen overnight, and the GEO program is still new, but we are optimistic about the potential for the program to grow deep roots in the university and to become an integral part of doctoral education for many students at Northwestern.

Addressing both academic and community goals (especially within the confines of a 10-week academic quarter) can be a challenge. We balance the learning needs of the students with community organization needs, but find it necessary to meet the students where they are and help them to engage with a community organization that dovetails with their personal interests and passions. Another complicating factor is that our students come from a variety of departments and have placements that mirror the diverse interests the students bring. Many of our doctoral students have stayed engaged with their community organization past the initial 10-week period, and we have also been able to connect the community organization to CCE’s other programs.

The GEO program models how a research university can begin to reform doctoral education. While every university has a different culture and history, the interest of the faculty in introducing civic engagement into the pedagogy of graduate study, coupled with a supportive administration, can and should lead to learning experiences that go beyond the classroom. The benefit is twofold. First, doctoral students learn how to include community research into a portfolio of skills that they can bring to an academic position after receiving their degree, and more generally, that civic engagement is a topic of scholarly interest and research. Second, a variety of career options become more real. The skill sets that lead to employment in nonprofit, cultural, and civic organizations are learned in and through engagement with those sectors. Both experiences are invaluable in crafting PhDs that are more
competitive in the changing job markets in the United States. Finally, the university itself is transformed into a learning community that is more responsive to the communities that surround the campus. The walls that separate our universities begin to crumble for students who want to contribute to the world, and who now have the skills to contribute to positive social change in that world.

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTORS

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