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Building Infrastructures for Community Engagement at the University of Louisville: Graduate Models for Cultivating Stewardship

Keri E. Mathis, Megan Faver Hartline, Beth A. Boehm, and Mary P. Sheridan

From our perspectives at the University of Louisville, we address the need to provide structures for graduate student participation in community-engaged scholarship. Architectures of participation such as the ones we describe in this piece—the Community Engagement Academy and the Digital Media Academy—offer graduate students the opportunity to practice designing and implementing community engagement projects within interdisciplinary *and* disciplinary sites. The models we provide were designed to make the invisible work of community engagement visible and to create low barriers of entry for graduate students to become stewards of their disciplines as well as stewards of their communities. Such opportunities, we argue, help promote a more capacious view of stewardship, and thus encourage emerging engaged scholars to learn how to act responsibly and wisely in conducting community-engaged research.

Keywords: graduate education, community engagement, institutional structures, engaged scholarship, interdisciplinarity

In 1973, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), the Educational Testing Service, and the Graduate Record Examinations Board commissioned a report on the need for alternative approaches to graduate education that would be responsive to changing social circumstances, and in particular, approaches that would encourage graduate students and their faculty to apply their knowledge to solving social problems. The Panel on Alternative Approaches to Graduate Education identified the now well-established tension between the graduate school's demands for scholarly and research excellence and the public's need for scholarly expertise to help solve some of its major problems:

The tension between the mastery of scholarship and the need for public involvement is another source of conflict. The words commitment and engagement occur more than once in the pages that follow, and this Panel is unanimous in its belief that the attitudes and behavior to which the terms point are essential to the vigor of teaching and scholarship. We are also

convinced that much more must be done to enable humanistic scholars and researchers in particular to perceive—and fully participate in—relationships between their knowledge and the problems facing a confused and fragmented society. (13-14)

Forty-three years later, conversations about graduate education still reflect the tensions between deep disciplinary knowledge and public engagement, between knowledge for its own sake and knowledge for the public good, and questions remain about how we should change graduate education to engender scholars who are both stewards of the disciplines as well as stewards of the community. Our understanding of stewardship draws upon the work of Walker et al. (2008), who seek to establish a purpose for graduate education that is “larger than the individual and implies action”; they argue that stewardship requires not only that scholars be able to evaluate and conserve past knowledge and generate new knowledge within their disciplines, but that scholars must also understand how their knowledge transforms the world in which they live, and must engage “in the transformational work of communicating their knowledge responsibly to others” (12). The concept of stewardship allows us to raise questions about the purposes of graduate education and about how we train scholars who are able to wisely and responsibly apply their knowledge to problems both within and outside of their disciplines.

There have been numerous calls since 1973 for dramatic changes to graduate education, some like that by Walker et al. in *The Formation of Scholars* that address graduate education in general, and some focused within the disciplines of English and Rhetoric and Composition.¹ Most share the concerns that doctoral education is deeply conservative and slow to change, that the apprenticeship model values theoretical knowledge-making over practical application of knowledge, and that educational programs prepare doctoral students for positions in the academy over positions in government, non-profits, or business. As the 2014 MLA Task Force Report shows, the disconnect between doctoral education and the world outside the ivory tower is particularly acute for scholars in the humanities, who are concerned that the public no longer believes study in the humanities is relevant or useful.

We are building infrastructures that provide opportunities for doctoral students to learn and *do* the work of engaged research, which we hope will help the public understand the relevance of graduate education, particularly in the humanities. While many institutions have woven service learning into the fabric of their curriculum for undergraduates, no widespread curriculum redesign has occurred at the graduate level, as all those calls for changes to doctoral education footnoted above lament. While service learning is designed to help undergraduates become productive and contributing citizens, we recognized the need to design the structures of participation that will help graduate students learn how to take their deep disciplinary knowledge and apply it to community problems.

The story of inflexible, slow-to-change graduate education is circulated often and is reinforced daily in the academy. In this snapshot we want to engender a different story for graduate education by describing how we are building what

Sheridan and Rowsell call “architectures of participation” that enable graduate students to become stewards who act wisely and responsibly. We discuss ways to design and implement programs to help students become stewards of both their disciplines and their communities using two examples: the Community Engagement Academy (CEA), which is offered by the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies for students from all disciplines, and Digital Media Academy (DMA), a program housed within the Rhetoric and Composition program in the English Department. We are not arguing for one or the other type of structure (centralized and interdisciplinary versus localized and disciplinary), but instead, we are arguing for multiple architectures which are intentionally redundant and which have low barriers for entry for students. The CEA is led by Beth Boehm, who holds the positions of Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies (SIGS), Vice Provost for Graduate Affairs, and Professor of English, and Keri Mathis, who is a PhD candidate in English and Beth’s research assistant in SIGS. Together, they designed an interdisciplinary Community Engagement Academy that includes workshops focused on the foundations of engaged scholarship and hands-on projects facilitated by their community partner. The second project is led by Mary P. Sheridan, Professor of English and mentor to Megan Hartline, a PhD candidate in English. Mary P. and Megan have worked together for the past two years developing and implementing the University of Louisville Digital Media Academy (DMA), a two-week digital production camp for sixth-grade girls from traditionally low-performing schools in the Louisville area, with teachers drawn from UofL’s Rhetoric and Composition PhD program. Responding to calls for change in graduate education, we designed architectures of participation that would encourage graduate students to wisely and responsibly apply their disciplinary knowledge to projects that impact the community.

The Community Engagement Academy

In Spring 2016, we, Beth and Keri, founded an interdisciplinary, co-curricular program on engaged scholarship to develop students as disciplinary and community stewards. The CEA is designed to provide multiple perspectives and mentorship from a variety of faculty, which challenges the apprenticeship model, and students are encouraged to develop projects and products that can be shared with—and valued by—academic colleagues as well as community partners. We instituted the CEA pilot program, including 16 graduate student participants from a variety of disciplines and approximately 9 session facilitators, comprised of faculty, administrative staff, graduate students, and community partners. The pilot sessions focused on topics ranging from the foundations of engaged scholarship, initiating and sustaining partnerships, and navigating the logistical landscapes of community-engaged work, to creating different types of products of engaged scholarship for academic and community audiences. In this brief snapshot, we discuss motives for developing the Community Engagement Academy and reflect on the experience of designing it to

allow graduate students from across disciplines several entry points into community-engaged research. Doing so, we argue, allows for the more expansive view of stewardship included in the multiple calls for changing graduate education.

The “Administrator’s” Motives (Beth)

As both a faculty member in English and the dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, I had multiple motives for developing the Community Engagement Academy (CEA) with Keri. One, I did not want graduate education left out when our President and Provost celebrated the university’s contributions to the community and our achievement of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification; I wanted graduate education—and the important work of our graduate students and faculty—to be visible. With this recognition, I wanted to make sure we had access to university resources dedicated to the university’s signature partnership programs—partnerships that encourage community-engaged work with historically underserved neighborhoods and schools, including those bordering the university. A second motive was admittedly pragmatic and career-focused: as the number of traditional faculty positions continues to decline, graduate deans—and some reluctant program faculty—are thinking about alternative careers for their graduates, so it made sense to use the CEA to help graduate students develop intellectual flexibility and practice applying their knowledge to community problems and begin to imagine potential careers outside of academe that would utilize their academic skills. A third motive came from our research on the retention of underrepresented minority graduate students (URMs), which suggests that URMs often come to graduate school seeking knowledge and skills to help their communities, and I hope that developing a structure to make it easier for such students to learn those skills and to meet others with similar interests will increase retention and lead to their successful completion of degrees. And finally, I hoped the CEA would provide an alternative to the traditional apprenticeship model—single master, single apprentice—by providing students with multiple potential mentors, both from within the academy and from the community partnerships, who would provide insights and skill development that the dissertation mentor may not be able to provide alone. While I do not myself “do” engaged scholarship in the community outside the university, I do view my work building cross-disciplinary structures for graduate student engagement and professional development as stewardship. Building such architectures of participation is essential to forming the next generation of scholars, to training them to act wisely and responsibly, and to encouraging them to use their knowledge and skills to improve their worlds.

As we designed the Community Engagement Academy, we wanted students to not only learn the key concepts of engaged research, but to also be immediately able to practice the skills necessary to do such work. Thus, we knew we needed at least one partner that had needs that students from a variety of disciplines might be able to meet as they also enacted the core principles of engaged research: reciprocity, collaborative knowledge-making, and sustainable partnerships. Our primary

community partner, the Parklands of Floyds Fork, is a donor-supported public park in East Louisville and includes approximately 4,000 acres of land in the Floyds Fork watershed (“About 21st Century Parks”). This relationship with the Parklands emerged serendipitously and offered graduate students participating in the Community Engagement Academy an existing partnership, albeit a relatively new one, in which they could enter and design projects responding to the Parklands’ self-identified needs. The CEA launched in Spring 2016 as a semester-long series of workshops that introduced the key concepts of engaged scholarship, research methodologies, and ways to establish and maintain relationships. The sessions were led by engaged faculty members at UofL, from disciplines including biology, education, English, and history, and staff from the university’s Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning and from the Office of Community Engagement. Additionally, the Parklands staff co-led some of the workshops in the pilot CEA, hosted one of the workshops in their facilities, and began to facilitate practical, hands-on projects for graduate students based on their needs. Now that the pilot CEA has ended, we continue to work with the Parklands to design projects that meet their needs. The following are some of the projects in development. The creation of digital curricular resources to provide pre- and post-field trip activities that will deepen the experience for elementary students involves both education students and rhetoric and composition students. Surveys of middle and high school teachers that will assess needs of these students in order to bring them to the parks are being designed by education students. Research on health and fitness uses of the Parklands is being conducted by community health students, and in the future, we expect an assessment of safety issues and safe design to be undertaken by urban planning and criminal justice students. Emerging out of a variety of motives and providing hands-on opportunities to develop the skills necessary for community-engaged work, this partnership with the Parklands highlights the important role administrators can play in designing structures for graduate education that can deepen students’ disciplinary knowledge while helping them learn how to contribute to community needs.

Co-Designing the CEA: A Graduate Student’s Perspective (Keri)

The key element of stewardship that I have learned and enacted in working with Beth on the Community Engagement Academy is *responsibility*—namely, a responsibility to make the invisible structures that enable and support graduate students’ engaged scholarship more visible. As Beth suggests above, graduate education is often overlooked in university decisions and in scholarship on community-engaged work. In academia, for instance, we have tended to focus heavily on and even fetishize traditional research products, particularly peer-reviewed publications, while products of applied research are often undervalued and invisible or relegated to service, even though the impact of this research can be profound on the community, the scholar, and discipline. As a graduate student invested in engaged scholarship and committed to helping emerging scholars find ways to conduct research and make their work

count, I see my responsibility as a CEA co-designer to make the structures that enable participation more visible and navigable for graduate students.

More specifically, in my role at SIGS, I felt responsible to make multiple, low barriers of entry (a key component of architectures of participation) available to students from across disciplines. Doing this was no easy task. It has required numerous meetings with Beth, our focus group, which includes faculty, staff, and graduate students, the Parklands' representatives, UofL's VP for University Advancement, and grants officers. Coordinating several meetings and making decisions for the CEAs implementation has been an invaluable experience for me to see how much work happens on the front-end of any engaged research project, much of which is rendered invisible in traditional academic publications. Further, because of my RA position, I have been privy to the constant negotiations occurring between the various stakeholders. Since this was such an enlightening experience for both Beth and me and enabled us to learn about community partnerships by *doing*, as Mary P. highlights below, we wanted to use our experiences to model for the students all of the steps involved in bringing the Parklands and the CEA together. And through this *doing*, I have been learning what it means to be a steward—one with responsibility to follow through on decisions that create architectures of participation and make them visible to those eager to learn and do more with community-engaged scholarship. In helping establish the partnership with the Parklands, creating sessions and assigning faculty and community partners to lead them, *and* co-writing two grants to help sustain the CEA after the pilot, I have seen what it means to be an engaged scholar and to be responsible to my university, our community partners, and the faculty and students involved.

The Digital Media Academy

Whereas the Community Engagement Academy offers *institutional* architectures that encourage graduate students to develop and apply disciplinary knowledge within academic and community contexts, the Digital Media Academy explores the benefits of creating such architectures on a *disciplinary* scale. In particular, we examine the participation structures within the Digital Media Academy to illustrate how the design and implementation of community-engaged projects beyond traditional classroom projects provide alternative educational opportunities that illustrate an expanded understanding of our field's disciplinary stewardship.

A Faculty Member's Goals (Mary P.)

In 2014, I founded the Digital Media Academy (DMA), a free, two-week digital media camp held at the University of Louisville. Five graduate students and one or two faculty members work with twenty rising 6th grade girls from historically under-performing public schools in Louisville. Although many behind-the-scene structures are becoming routinized, such as forms, press releases, room reservations, and meal

contracts, graduate students are central to the realization of each year's camp, from selecting a theme to designing curriculum, choosing appropriate technologies, and creating assessments that match the pedagogical, research, and funding goals.

When I created DMA, I began with two premises relevant to graduate education. The first premise is that deep learning happens when ideas are put into action, and that action often becomes the leading edge of additional deep learning (see Gee). Consequently, I believe that in addition to graduate seminars that help introduce and contextualize debates central to a topic, we need to provide structures for graduate students to wrestle with disciplinary reading/theory/knowledge by engaging in the application of that reading/theory/knowledge. DMA is one such structure. Prior to DMA, graduate students read about community engagement, meet with community partners, and discuss shared resources and goals; during DMA, graduate students enact and trouble-shoot our best laid plans; after DMA, graduate students reflect upon and analyze the data, and write-up grant reports and research articles. Through this process, graduate students learn the complexities of disciplinary knowledge, such as what "messiness" feels like when doing qualitative research, and the complexities of community-engaged work, such as the factors involved in sustaining partnerships and making shared knowledge. As graduate students live the visible and invisible work necessary in community-engaged projects, they move beyond apprenticeship to leadership within DMA itself as head of the pedagogy, technology, assessment or logistic working groups. In providing such participatory structures, DMA illustrates one way to offer extended, legitimate opportunities for people to learn by doing, a project that exceeds typical opportunities found in graduate education.

A second premise that shaped my design of DMA related to graduate education is that projects emerging out of deeply held values can sustain a career. I believe what Steve Parks claims:

[Y]ou always need to act upon your own moral compass, the ethical system that drives you forward. You should never put your values to the side. This is the only way you will know if the field can be a space to do important work for you. It is also the only way you can learn the navigational skills that allow you to build your own research, your own community projects, as your career progresses. (Harvey, Kirklighter, and Pauszek 12)

Consequently, I believe graduate students need more opportunities to explore how to integrate their values within academically sanctioned research and knowledge-making. DMA creates such opportunities for graduate students to learn the navigational skills to keep their ethical system in the forefront as they determine what "doing important work" looks like *for them*. For example, many DMA teachers, myself included, have long-standing histories with social justice projects, which we struggle to integrate into our academic present. As an explicitly feminist, activist educational site, DMA provides a space for graduate students to examine both the camp's questions—e.g., "What intersectional factors are shaping girls' choices?" or

“What structures can help can girls design digital responses to these choices?”—and their own research questions about topics such as gendered and racialized digital divides, the seeds leading to skewed demographics within high paying STEM fields, the hyper-sexualized images that surround us, and the construction of race in media. By offering participation structures beyond those in a typical classroom, DMA provides graduate students diverse ways to develop the skills they value so that they can pursue disciplinary and community-based knowledge-making, a move that shows the capacious ways our field can encourage disciplinary stewardship.

Graduate Student Experiences (Megan)

One thing I have appreciated about DMA, as an architecture of graduate education, is that it offers multiple entry points for graduate students across a wide range of disciplinary interests to imagine how their work might shape and be shaped by a community engagement project. For me, that transition was straightforward because I was already interested in community literacy following Mary P’s course. Though I participated in a six-week engaged project during that course, DMA was my first opportunity to *design* an engaged research project. In working with our team to use disciplinary knowledge in digital media pedagogy, identity formation, and community literacy to plan the camp, I was able to deepen my understanding of community literacy, particularly expanding my experience with the various structures and background work that go into designing a project. Alternatively, DMA required Keri to think extensively about how her central research questions surrounding the connections between female identity and technology use might apply to this new context—working with middle school girls—rather than in her dissertation’s historical context of the Renaissance and 18th century. By thinking about her research in this new way, Keri was able to see ways that her research connects to contemporary community issues *and* think more deeply about her dissertation research, learning more about how women (or in this case, girls) use technology to activate particular identities. In both of these cases, Keri and I were able to make connections between our research interests and DMA, allowing us to see how what we have learned in a classroom might be taken up in a community context, and to become better disciplinary stewards in the process.

Additionally, DMA served as an opportunity for graduate students to activate personal values developed outside of their academic pursuits in public, disciplinary engagement. One teacher, Sara, explains in a blog kept before and during camp, that one of her core scholarly goals is “creating more consistent bridges between youth in the community and the academy” within her research, which had previously consisted of community-based, ethnographically-informed research that was not strongly connected to her position at the university. Sara did not see many available, institutional paths to pursue the bridges she had been trying to build for underrepresented minority students like herself, but DMA offered an institutionally sanctioned way to act on her values in a research project, which also served to offer her another way of thinking about how to effect change in her local

community. Another teacher, Michelle, has also been able to use DMA to deepen her understanding of theory through practice by enacting her strongly held values about the importance of trauma-informed care, values created, in part, through her volunteer work as a hospital advocate for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Before camp, Michelle facilitated a workshop on trauma-informed care for all of the DMA teachers to help prepare us to work with our campers, many of whom are statistically more likely to have experienced trauma, in part because they are living and attending school in historically underserved areas of Louisville. Michelle led the teachers in making camp a safe space for girls who may have been affected by trauma, including moderating a large-group discussion on day two of camp after girls disclosed that some older boys from another camp had been harassing them with sexually- and racially-charged comments. Using trauma-informed care at DMA was a “formative experience” for her, allowing her to not only create a better camp experience for the girls but also make practical connections with her values and research to show why attention to trauma is so important for community engagement work in the field. Sara and Michelle were both able to use DMA as a disciplinary space to enact core values of their research, exploring how they can use their values and previous experiences to design community projects *and* build disciplinary knowledge.

Conclusion

We began this article by referencing calls for reform in graduate education. As our snapshot illustrates, we at the University of Louisville are making headway in responding to these calls by building structures that encourage graduate students to enact more expansive understandings of what it means to be disciplinary stewards, charged with acting ethically and responsibly and making wise decisions in academic and community realms. As models, the Community Engagement Academy and Digital Media Academy encourage graduate students to enact their research in a range of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and community contexts. They privilege learning through doing, making invisible structures visible, and ensuring low barriers for entry so that graduate students can imagine new possibilities for their work and shape their own education within a range of academic structures. We hope our descriptions reveal some of the motives, premises, and uptakes of these models, which, we believe, highlight how interdisciplinary and disciplinary structures can help students see themselves as stewards committed to graduate school’s traditional demands for scholarly excellence and the public’s call for scholarly expertise to contribute to the public good.

Notes

1. Calls for changes to graduate education, generally: “Scholarship for Society: Panel on Alternate Approaches to Graduate Education” (1973); *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990); *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education* (2006); and *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (2008).

On the humanities, English, and rhetoric and composition: Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin, *The Future of Doctoral Study in English* (1989); North, *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies* (2000); “Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature” (2014); “Interview with Steve Parks” (2015).

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Author Bios

Keri E. Mathis is a doctoral candidate in English at UofL. She researches at the intersection of theories of genre, media, and gendered identity-formation and has recently become interested in researching graduate student professionalization.

Megan Faver Hartline is also a doctoral candidate in English at UofL. Her current project examines institutional structures for community engagement, focusing on how emerging engaged scholars learn to navigate these structures.

Beth A. Boehm is a Professor of English, Vice Provost for Graduate Affairs, and Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies at UofL. Her research areas include narrative and rhetorical theory, 20th-century British literature, and more recently, graduate student professional development, doctoral education, and graduate mentoring.

Mary P. Sheridan, Professor of English at UofL, researches and teaches on questions relating to digital composing, community engagement, and feminist methodologies. She has long engaged in extended CE projects and has written about methods that can help with this kind of work.