Chapter 8

Benefits of Engaging Doctoral Students in Community-Based Research Projects

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the self-reported benefits of 112 doctoral students in a college of education who completed a community-based research project. Findings are based on students’ answers to the survey question “What did you learn about conducting research or yourself as a researcher through this experience?” The themes of knowledge, self, practice, and skill and related subthemes emerged in their written answers. Doctoral students gained knowledge and skills required of community-engaged scholars, which shaped their self-image as such. The findings of this study support the expansion of and support for community-based research projects in academic programs, departments, colleges, and universities.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education institutions increasingly seek alternative learning opportunities for their graduate students within their communities. Engaged scholarship differs from traditional instruction in that it incorporates authentic activities designed to help students connect theory with practice and experience theoretical concepts in practical, behavioral modes and real-life situations (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stevens, 2003). Students of all levels are asked to leave their institutional settings and go...
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out into the community, learn of its needs, and then assist community members with meeting those needs (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paynter, 2014), thus challenging and changing the public’s perception of higher education (Butin, 2010).

Boyer (1996) argued that “the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement” (p. 11). Engaged scholarship within university coursework involves the faculty and students developing community partnerships in addressing such challenging issues, while integrating and applying academic content (Paynter, 2014). The partnership aspect of engaged scholarship places doctoral students in the type of communities they will serve upon graduation, the ideal environment for situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The dean of the college of education featured in this study believed that all doctoral students needed opportunities to work in community partnerships, not just those lucky few whose faculty mentor was engaged in community-based research. This study was a means of providing the doctoral students’ assessment of the dean’s initiative. Thus, the questions that guide this study are: “What do doctoral students in a college of education perceive to be the benefits of engaging in a community-based research experience?” “What is their level of satisfaction with their experience?”

BACKGROUND

The dean of the college of education had developed a strong record of being awarded grants that partnered school districts and his prior institution. He believed that all doctoral students should complete a community-engaged scholarship (CES) project prior to starting their dissertation, that it would supply a vital connection between theory and practice. He first presented this idea to faculty as a pilot project. Few guidelines were given other than the students needed to find a community partner and collaborate on a project that was meaningful to the partner. Faculty selected doctoral students who were finishing their last few classes to participate in piloting the idea. Some programs were able to work the project into practicums, internships, or a specific course (e.g., counselor education, school psychology). Other programs implemented community-engaged projects by having a few students working with one or two faculty members (higher education, curriculum, and instruction).

In Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate, Boyer (1990) stated that to be considered scholarship “service activities must be tied directly to one’s special field of knowledge and relate to, and flow directly out of, this professional activity” (p. 22). Boyer’s work has become the foundation of universities’ efforts to redesign structures around expanded definitions of scholarship (Glass, Doberneck, & Schweitzer, 2011; Moore, Bliss, Fuqua, & Gardner, 2014; Ward, 2003). For example, many graduate programs and faculty have responded to O’Meara and Jaeger’s (2006) call for more engagement in graduate programs (e.g., Jaeger, Tuchmayer, & Morin, 2014; Morin, Jaeger, & O’Meara, 2016). Graduate students in fields such as education and public health have tended to be more engaged than graduate students in other disciplines (Jaeger et al., 2014).

Engagement activities are most impactful when integrated within the core of teaching, research, and service (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012). Such experiences can provide students opportunities to advance in the scholarship of engagement and engaged research. Wilcoxox (2019) stated that these experiences are just “one way the academy can help create mutual respect between scholars and practitioners, develop longer-lasting partnerships, and improve the value and rigor of research” (p. 6).
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