Preventing Graduate Student Heroic Suicide in Community-Based Research: A Tale of Two Committees

Nancy K. Franz
Iowa State University

Graduate students are increasingly interested in community-based research and public scholarship. However, they often struggle to find faculty research mentors who fully understand or have been personally involved with this type of research and related scholarship. In fact, some graduate students are advised by graduate committee members to refrain from working with communities and community stakeholders. Graduate students also experience few opportunities to develop skills and knowledge for community-based scholarship. It is clear that graduate students interested in community-based research need tools to navigate these dynamics. This article proposes a research stakeholder advisory committee as a successful tool for graduate students with community-based scholarship aspirations.

Introduction

Community-based education and research (i.e., academic work in or with communities) is experiencing a renaissance (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Peters, Jordan, Adamek, & Alter, 2005). Yet, there are many challenges for young scholars in higher education to fully participate in this movement. This article describes these challenges, including academic heroism in conducting community-based research. The importance of collaboration for learning and preparation of graduate students for conducting research is also explored. A research stakeholder advisory committee is described through a case study as a way to help graduate students prevent "heroic suicide" as they conduct research. Finally, lessons learned from working with advisory committees are shared.

Graduate Student Challenges

Graduate students are increasingly interested in community-based research and public scholarship (Jaeger, Sandmann, & Kim, 2011). However, they often struggle to find graduate committee members who fully understand or have been personally involved with this type of research

and related scholarship (Jaeger, Sandmann, & Kim, 2011). In fact, some graduate students are advised by graduate committee members to refrain from working with communities and community stakeholders. Graduate students also experience few opportunities to develop skills and knowledge for community-based scholarship (Franz, Childers, & Sanderline, 2012; Jaeger, Sandmann, & Kim, 2011).

The first challenge for these graduate students often includes navigating an "academic-only" graduate experience, when instead they have an interest in and career aspirations to become community-based scholars. Therefore, the academic department and degree program must be chosen carefully if community-based scholarship is the intended outcome. Students are often discouraged by a prevalent academic culture that restricts participation in graduate committees to subject-matter experts who guide and judge the academic quality of the student's scholarship. As a result of this tradition, the student's course work supports the goal of attaining skills in developing theory and research rather than engaging with communities to use research and scholarship to address important social, economic, or environmental issues.

The most common graduate school goal continues to focus on a master-apprentice model for developing junior faculty to further the major advisor's research (Jaeger, Sandman, & Kim, 2011). Combine these realities with the hierarchical structure of higher education, and graduate students interested in community-based research have a difficult time achieving their academic goals. They find few faculty members who can envision and support their objectives in addition to the many bureaucratic structures and cultural norms that confound their aspirations. These students sometimes fail to choose faculty members and academic programs that fit their interests. Add this to the fact that, contrary to higher education's focus, communities and community stakeholders value shared power and a focus on problem solving. Despite these challenges, there are many graduate students who persevere, conducting valuable research and produce community-based scholarship (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012).

Heroism and Academia

Academia loves certain kinds of heroes, specifically master teachers and heavily funded individual researchers. Promotion and tenure processes privilege individual competence, in spite of substantial research showing that teams are often more effective than individual efforts (Franz, 2004). The promotion and tenure culture, in some ways, parallels Joseph Campbell's (1949) metaphor of the hero's journey. Through analysis of the heroes of myths and stories, he suggests the hero goes through stages: departure from his/her current world, initiation into a new world, and return

to the old world with the prize. This adventure includes particular milestones including trials, thresholds, guardians, and fights. Campbell asserts that the hero is destined to fix things. In particular, he says, "[h]e is the hero of the way of thought-single hearted, courageous, and full of faith that the truth, as he finds it, shall make us free." (p. 18). The promotion and tenure culture at most institutions contains similar elements.

Heifitz's (1994) view of heroism, which is based on trait theories of leadership, posits the leader acting as a great individual – or hero – who operates as a lone warrior or whose heroism and brilliance positions him/her to lead the way. Heifitz believes being a "lone-warrior" results in "heroic suicide" in today's world. From an academic perspective, this heroic suicide is sometimes seen in graduate students who single-handedly attempt to conduct research in or with communities. These budding academic heroes, by acting alone, may poorly conduct research, damage university-community relationships, and even abandon their scholarly pursuits altogether as a result of isolation and discouragement.

This disconnect between academic-as-hero and academic-as-team member is especially profound for graduate students conducting community-based research with teams of stakeholders. A number of colleges and universities seek the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, which focuses engagement on university-community engagement best practices from an exchange of knowledge and resources in reciprocal partnerships for mutual benefit (Franz, 2011). This work is most influential when a team of academics and community members work closely together to address pressing issues. Yet, a graduate student's reality is often one of being indoctrinated into the heroic culture of higher education, rather than immersion in a collaborative approach to learning. It is clear that graduate students interested in community-based research need preparation and tools to navigate these dynamics.

Countering Heroic Culture: Collaboration through Partnerships

Research reveals that partnerships enhance personal empowerment and development (Purser & Cabana, 1998) and decrease professional isolation (Sockett, 1993). Working in partnership with others also creates synergy, resulting in individual and group transformation through transcendence of personal interests for the common good (Avolio, 1997; Bass, 1995; Osborne, 2000). Successful partnerships are learning-oriented (Moss Kanter, 1994); further, when partnerships focus on common goals but involve differing perspectives, learning is often transformational (Franz, 2005). For transformative learning to be sustained, support from others is needed over time (Cranton, 1994). In a community setting, experiential education in partnerships enhances learning (Reardon, 2000).

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification emphasizes "connections between higher education institutions and their communities, attention to collaboration and reciprocal learning and benefits, and the relevance of engaged scholarship to teaching, research, and service" (Austin, 2010, p. 3). To be sure, heroic engagement efforts are not part of the application criteria for the Carnegie classification or reclassification. Instead, the scholarship of engagement, sometimes called "public scholarship" in higher education emphasizes collaboration as a best practice (Chambers & Gopaul, 2010).

Graduate student learning and research can be deeply enhanced in collaboration with communities. Ramaley believes this is especially important for students as scholars attempting to address today's "highly contested and poorly defined problems" (2010, p. 356). This often requires students to develop skills and experiences in teamwork, collaboration, and conflict resolution (Austin & Beck, 2010). However, in spite of these best practices O'Meara observes, "the requirements of the dissertation still focus predominantly on individual rather than collaborative work" (2010, p. 283).

Preparation of Graduate Students

The preparation of graduate students in higher education emphasizes research productivity and this guides graduate education requirements (Austin & Beck, 2010; Bridger & Alter, 2006). Students are socialized to be scholars, yet research shows that graduate students receive mixed messages on what is valued in academia. They perceive a difference between what they see as the day-to-day work of faculty with what they hear about academic reward systems (Austin, 2002; Nyquist et al., 1999). Doctoral students in particular may fail to understand specific details of faculty work across all higher education missions since it is sometimes invisible to them (Austin, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001).

Today's graduate students need support for success inside and outside academia. This is especially important because during graduate education students develop a scholarly identity, related networks, and prioritize certain kinds of work over others. One university president suggested that graduate students need to be more intentional, empowered, informed, and responsible through academic programs that better integrate formal studies with life experiences (Ramaley, 2010). In particular, Ramaley believes graduate curriculum should focus more on context instead of content; should help students navigate multiple view points; and should explore changing North American culture. In response to such claims, updated doctoral education competencies are being articulated with increasing

frequency (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). This move is critical for institutions intending to educate graduate students to be active citizens (Ward & Moore, 2010) and situate graduate students as co-learners and co-creators, with faculty and communities, of public scholarship (Curry-Stevens, 2011; Fretz & Longo, 2010).

Preparation of Graduate Students for Public Scholarship:
Focus on Public Good Instead of Academic Heroics

Graduate students should be prepared with more than disciplinary training to conduct community-based research and public scholarship (Duffey, 2011). This often requires student engagement with activities outside the classroom to develop public scholarship skills, experience, and perspectives. However, no tool currently exists for assessing this engagement by graduate students similar to surveys conducted on engagement of undergraduates. Graduate education is also especially suited for community engagement across disciplines (Duffey, 2011); however, many graduate students feel their programs do not prepare them for this interdisciplinary experience or work with communities, even though they indicate they want careers that include community service not just community-based research (Austin, 2002). O'Meara believes, "a central concern for future generations is the reform of graduate education be more focused on public work" (2010, p. 283).

The graduate curriculum often lacks content and experiences that support developing community-based scholars. Graduate students should learn about the concepts of outreach, public service, and engagement, as well as community-based research and action research through service-learning, exploring community issues and integrating these concepts into course projects (Austin & Beck, 2010). This change in curriculum often requires moving from an expert-based approach to a more democratic approach (Saltmarsh, 2010). One experimental graduate course at Cornell University required student teams to develop practitioner profiles on public scholars to experience collaborative learning, action research skill development, and organizational change (Peters & Hittleman, 2003). Other pedagogical approaches that prepare community-based researchers include volunteerism, community service, internships, field work, and community service-learning (Furco, 1996). Benchmarks and indicators are increasingly being implemented and monitored to determine if graduate students are gaining the skills and experiencing the supports necessary for successful community-based research and public scholarship (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010).

Recommendations for Graduate Community-Based Research Preparation

Community-based research preparation for graduate students needs to include experiences to observe and develop this community-engaged research and related public scholarship through faculty mentors and other skill and perspective-building opportunities (Austin & Beck, 2010; Booker, Montgomery-Block, Scott, Reyes, & Onyewuenyi, 2011). This training may include revealing varying dimensions of scholarship, stakeholder perspectives and ethics, appropriate methodology, and related logistics including expert interviewing, transcription, editing, and reporting skills, interpersonal and cultural competencies, and examining the democratic purposes and organizational change goals of research and public scholarship (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Peters, O'Connell, Alter, & Jack, 2006). These opportunities require faculty mentors help students make connections with communities and provide assistance in securing funds to support such research (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Vogel, Fichtenberg, & Levin, 2010).

Graduate students need to develop leadership skills for community-based research and public scholarship, not just the ability to replicate faculty activity. This is especially important for success since the context, culture, and perspectives are different in each community, and universal approaches often fail when researching complex social, economic, and environmental issues. Consistent with Heifitz's (1994) belief that heroic leaders are not successful in today's context, students should intentionally study and develop more collaborative leadership styles for community-based research, such as transformative or servant leadership (Northouse, 2013).

To reinforce skill development, campus culture should support students' community-based research and public scholarship goals. Campus graduate culture can help students build a public scholarship identity through opportunities for socialization, apprenticeships, mentoring, and networking. Students thus develop a scholarship mindset and skills, explore engaged careers, provide interdisciplinary spaces for holistic engagement, and offer appropriate recognition (Doberneck, Brown, & Allen, 2010; Franz et al., 2012). Specifically designed graduate student programs and professional development activities such as the emerging scholars program at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference and Campus Compact learning opportunities help supplement campus leadership development opportunities (Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010).

No perfect system of graduate education exists that provides students with experiences to become competent practitioners and leaders of

community-based research. Public scholarship as a connection to public work is often missing or not evident in the academic department culture (O'Meara, 2010). The need to create such systems is great. Scoby states, "Public scholarship has the capacity to make democratic problem solving and democratic culture more robust; public engagement has the capacity to make scholarship more vibrant and consequential" (2011, p. 7). Public scholarship resulting from community-based research often transforms researchers, students, and community partners, suggesting the transformational change that can be realized when everyone on campus supports preparing students for community-based research and public scholarship (Curry-Stevens, 2011; Franz, 2005).

The Research Stakeholder Advisory Committee: A Case Study

As a Ph.D. student at a land-grant university, I developed a research stakeholder advisory committee (RSAC). This RSAC helped me situate my research in authentic community-based public scholarship principles, allowed me to adhere to academic requirements not easily compatible with community-based research, and, as I will argue, prevented me from heroic suicide as an academic. The RSAC also helped me clearly understand how to effectively engage with the community I studied and tempered my heroic tendencies to want to forge ahead in my own way and own time. For over a decade now, I have helped graduate students develop similar RSA committees to ensure appropriateness, effectiveness, and practicality of their community-based research and public scholarship. I hope I have also helped prevent heroic suicide for some graduate students in my years as a faculty advisor and committee member.

The RSAC created by the student usually includes three to ten stakeholders, ranging from key community influencers to research participants and members of organizations impacted by the research. These individuals must be willing to advise the student first as a researcher; however, secondarily, they may participate in the student's research conducted in their communities. They have a deep interest in the success of the student and also value the implications of the research for themselves, their group, or their community. Stakeholders with academic affiliations may be necessary, in some cases, to bring certain types of credibility perceived as compelling by the student's academic graduate committee.

The RSAC members serve as devil's advocates, asking hard questions and stretching the student's thinking about the study, data, and use of the results. Through regular meetings, the RSAC provides advice to the student on identifying and selecting research partners, reviewing or piloting research tools, and, also vital, the Committee helps the student connect with research participants. Once data is collected, the group helps the

student by providing feedback that affirms, shapes, challenges, or expands the findings. The committee members often improve data quality through their authentic perspectives from prolonged engagement in the community, their community-based observations, and the ability to triangulate meaning across community data sources. Group members also provide insights on implications of the research for community action, policy, and future research for the student to consider for inclusion in their dissertation or other scholarly publications. The RSAC also provides personal support for the student throughout the research process by motivating them, keeping them on track, helping them understand ethical issues, improving or validating their abilities as a researcher. The combined effect of this community-embedded support system helps prevent heroic suicide of students new to community-based research and public scholarship, because the student sees that community-based research is necessarily collaborative. The RSAC may also help the student think about and navigate conflicts between community and academic cultures and perspectives to enhance the success of the research and the student's academic trajectory.

RSA committees usually operate parallel to formal university graduate study committees, with the student serving as the link between the two groups. This relationship requires the student work with both groups to clarify specific roles they each play – one to assist with the community-based aspects of the research and the other to guide the academic norms for research and scholarship (see Table 1).

Features	Academic Graduate Committee	Stakeholder Advisory Committee
Goal	Theory development	Problem Solving
Operations	Acadmeic norms (bound by semesters, rules)	Community norms (24/7, bound by imperative of action)
Power	Hierarchial	Shared
Role	Experts on research and content	Co-learners with student researcher
Value	Meet Criteria for being a scholar	Address social, economic, and environmental issues

Table 1. Comparison of dissertation research committees

The RSAC differs from other research committees for community-based research. Its primary purpose is to support the graduate student's

academic experience, while addressing community issues is secondary. The committee is advisory in nature and may not be actively involved in research processes or sharing results. Often the members of the committee have a working understanding of the graduate experience, which equips them to serve as community-based mentors for the student.

The RSAC has now been used successfully for over a decade with graduate students and in my own research (Franz, 2012; Franz, Piercy, Donaldson, Richard, & Westbrook, 2010; Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith & Peters, 2012). The RSACs have inspired me to continue to experiment with improving higher education and public scholarship (Franz & Cox, 2012). The RSACs have also urged me to share my engaged scholarship journey and lessons learned with others (Franz, 2009; Franz 2011). Many of these insights often come from the RSACs and students with whom I have learned.

Lessons Learned

Work with RSACs and the students engaged with them has not always been easy, but it has always been worthwhile. Several lessons learned with RSACs over the years can help students and seasoned academics advance public scholarship through community-based research supported by mechanisms like the RSAC.

Students who work with RSACs need to expect conflicting perspectives and expectations between the stakeholder and the academic committees. This conflict can often be used in positive ways to shape change in communities and on campus. Advisory committees can help students save time building relationships with communities and key influencers, but they may also take a substantial amount of the student's time to set up and work through all the perspectives and advice presented, especially if it conflicts with their academic graduate committee's perspectives and advice. The RSAC also expedites access to research participants and data sources that often result in more authentic findings. However, students find little positive recognition on campus for using advisory groups. Sometimes graduate committee members show uncertainty about the role and authority of the RSAC in the research process. The student needs to work with their academic advisor on the development and use of the RSAC and be prepared to serve as a bridge between the two cultures. Students must also realize the graduate committee trumps the RSAC on research and academic rules and norms and ultimately the ability to graduate and secure academic work.

Faculty advising students interested in community-based scholarship need to determine if their approach to research will help or hinder the student. They then should commit to the student accordingly, rather than

simply try to change the student's research or career aspirations instead of their own. A co-learning approach to academic advising and graduate research can provide fertile personal development for faculty as well as students as they learn from each other. Advisors should be particularly aware of their role in influencing a graduate student's academic success as well as their success with community-based research and public scholarship (Jaeger et al., 2011).

Communities benefit from graduate student research by experiencing better problem solving on community issues. Working together also builds sustainable relationships with higher education for future work together. Some community members specifically enjoy mentoring and helping students through their academic and occupational desires as alumni or other personal interests. Engaging with higher education to help solve community problems often requires patience and persistence by all involved since the academic world has different norms and culture than communities. Students come and go with semesters and are often away from research projects during academic breaks and summers. On a pragmatic level, even a simple act as a community member such as coming to campus to meet with a student for a RSAC meeting can be complicated as they struggle to find parking and navigate a maze of campus buildings (Franz et al., 2012).

Many supports are needed to help students, faculty, and community members become comfortable and successful working with each other through RSACs. Student support should be a main focus as stakeholders and academics work together. Specific supports should include providing information on public scholarship in new graduate student orientation and department seminars. Advisors also need to be more fully aware of faculty and other resources students can access to conduct community-based research, including helping students select appropriate course work and committee members. Graduate student mentors should support mentee interests in content and context to help them develop an appropriate research agenda and skills. Academic departments should also have stakeholder advisory committees that model community engagement to inspire public scholarship in faculty and students. Finally, academic departments should provide opportunities for community stakeholders to participate in thesis and dissertation defenses to assess the student's success in conducting community-based research even though this may be unusual for some departments.

Conclusion

Graduate students are increasingly attracted to community engaged research and public scholarship yet the graduate experience often fails to provide the learning and experiences needed to conduct this work success-

fully. Students tend to engage in heroic suicide by traveling the engaged research journey alone without appropriate faculty or community stakeholder guidance. Graduate program reform needs to include a stronger focus on engaged research and public scholarship including collaboration to enhance learning and results and a focus on scholarship for the public good. Until reforms are realized more pervasively, graduate students may prevent heroic suicide in conducting community-based research by creating a research stakeholder advisory committee to help guide their work. Through the RSAC, joys and challenges of engaged research and public scholarship are shared. The quality of public scholarship increases through engagement with community stakeholders as they work jointly with researchers to address important community issues.

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Author

Nancy Franz, Ph.D., serves as Associate Dean for Extension and Outreach in the College of Human Sciences and Director of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach to Families. Franz has served as an extension agent, specialist, graduate student, and administrator over her life with extension systems in Wisconsin, New York, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Iowa. Her research focuses on conditions promoting transformative learning in non-formal education environments and measuring and reporting university engagement.