

## The Push and Pull of Being Publicly Active in Graduate School

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**B**ecoming “publicly active” as a Ph.D. student in English and Education at the University of Michigan was a slow and at times bewildering process, with periods of frustration punctuated by moments of exhilaration. Consistently I encountered exciting opportunities for public scholarship and then saw these efforts dismissed or ignored. On one hand, I was fortunate to collaborate with scholars such as Buzz Alexander, whose Prison Creative Arts Project facilitates theater and writing workshops in prisons throughout Michigan and puts on a stunning exhibition of artwork by Michigan prisoners every spring. At the other extreme, multiple professors admonished me to pursue social justice in other forums—in other words, they believe the academy simply is not geared for such work. In short, graduate school gave me both the desire for public engagement and considerable anxiety about whether to pursue it within academia.

Regarding the development of a sense of civic responsibility, my graduate education was enormously beneficial. Many seminars in both the English Department and the School of Education engaged issues of inequality and oppression, and we spent much time discussing how these forces operate ideologically, particularly in relation to race, class, and gender. However, as my interests in civic engagement intensified, I learned that my program lacked systemic means for encouraging such work. I also found that many professors who speak eloquently about these issues neither pursue public agendas nor consider such efforts to be “serious” intellectual work. I was left to follow an oftentimes wearisome trial-and-error path toward public scholarship, and as a result my initial attempts at public engagement occurred independently from my progress toward a degree.

This desire for civic action, standing uneasily alongside my still poorly defined vision of, and lack of confidence in, pursuing such work led me to temporarily leave graduate school and teach English in the Peace Corps. Upon returning two years later, I found that the institutional pattern of both encouraging and discouraging public engagement remained; what had changed was my level of self-assurance and commitment. For example, in the fall of 2006 the University began a yearlong examination of citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and called for curriculum development around the issue. Having previously faced departmental resistance to teaching writing with a civic focus, I tied my courses to the theme in order to obtain approval. I felt further validated by the English Department upon receiving a teaching award that year, which enabled me to teach the following year in the Michigan Community Scholars Program, a living-learning community that promotes public action among undergraduates. I learned that once one finds institutional sanction for civic engagement, opportunities beget further opportunities.

Also in 2006 several graduate students and I formed a partnership with teachers at an underserved Detroit high school to promote college access for its students. Several professors attended our initial meetings and pledged support, while administrators expressed interest in funding us. However, the funding never came, and several other professors counseled us not to bother; they were concerned, perhaps even convinced, that we would screw things up—that we would recreate the “academic horror stories” described by Paula Mathieu in her book *Tactics of Hope*. Ironically, however, this skepticism served a positive purpose, strengthening our

commitment and keeping us humble. The project was co-conceived and co-designed in a way that reflected a hybridization of everyone's interests, and all participating students went on to college, with several receiving prestigious scholarships.

These experiences taught me that wonderful possibilities exist for graduate students to practice public scholarship. In fact, although they lack the same institutional authority or access to funding, in some ways graduate students have *more* options than professors, especially junior faculty. In the college access project, for example, our relative lack of institutional demands enabled us to nurture a community partnership without having a clear research plan, which might have been impossible for most assistant professors. That is, I am skeptical that our primary goal of helping underprivileged students go to college would fit into the plans of a new professor facing significant publishing requirements to obtain tenure.

Yet, it is difficult to envision a university culture that genuinely fosters civic engagement at the graduate level. Although such opportunities exist, they are rarely systemically located within departments. My own fledgling desire to merge scholarship with community engagement was almost scuttled before taking hold, and I had to *leave* my program in order to re-envision myself as a publicly active scholar. "Coming up" in a more supportive environment would have helped, but I doubt that civic engagement can be built up from the graduate level into the disciplinary mainstream. Must it not run in the other direction, or at least occur simultaneously?

Encouraging students to practice public scholarship without likewise changing departments to encourage the professoriate as well would mean continuing to send the mixed signals I received throughout graduate school. We must push toward a future in which students inspired to public action do not subsequently feel compelled to refrain from such work upon entering a faculty's junior ranks.

Certainly I believe that students should have greater awareness of civic opportunities early in their graduate careers, and there must be greater mentorship for civically minded students. Still more importantly, but less pragmatically, is that more professors at all levels who engage issues of structural inequality through academic discourse must participate in, and find institutional support for active efforts to redress these social ills; they must lead by example to serve as templates for their students. To do otherwise is to spread the dangerous idea that a scholar's role in addressing inequality is mostly conceptual, and that scholars can contemplate and "complicate" activism but cannot realistically put this thinking into practice. Yet institutional change is slow to come, and as Richard Miller has argued, generally occurs at the margins of academic life. In the meantime, publicly active scholarship will continue to be the work of a few committed individuals, and much uncertainty will remain about the purpose, practicality, and scholarly value of civic engagement.

### **Works Cited**

- Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2005.
- Miller, Richard. *As if Learning Mattered*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.