Does the Academy Need an "Extreme Makeover"?

Allison Gross, University of Washington

In the spring of 2007 I helped organize a research cluster with three other graduate students at the University of Washington that focused on the question of public scholarship for academics. We formed the group Students Writing in Public (SWIP), and, taking it as given that public scholarship is of value because it extends the readership of our work beyond the academy and therefore the impact that it might have, committed ourselves to pursuing (via weekly writing meetings/workshops and quarterly guest speakers) how to go about doing this thing called "public writing." At the time, we conceived of public writing as a translation of our academic work into non-jargon-laden prose, largely as articles and editorials for popular magazines and newspapers. We saw SWIP as an opportunity to try out different kinds of writing so as to engage with an audience less familiar with the "conversations" in which we regularly take part.

SWIP helped me, specifically, see the possibility of putting my writing skills to very different use than the academy traditionally calls for. As a volunteer tutor in an underfunded Seattle Public School and a teacher of composition, I worked with students to write *on behalf of* community organizations when we pursued external funding for a project to benefit a school where we volunteered. In editorials and letters to politicians, we wrote to educate people outside the academy *about* the problems facing schools. I felt that my volunteering and these "public" projects were commensurate with my pedagogical goals and scholarly interests and that they enriched my understanding of what I was trying to accomplish in my participation in SWIP. Unfortunately, two quarters in, SWIP's energy flagged. Participation fell to the four of us that started the group and one or two other people at each meeting. While public practice by graduate student scholars may be on the upswing, my experience with SWIP points to problems that we still have to face. At the same time, it helps me to imagine where we need to go from here.

One major problem we face as graduate students is both the reality and the perception of any kind of civic engagement as "extra work." Where does one find time to engage in public service and writing when academic writing and teaching responsibilities seem to absorb the entirety of one's professional commitment? This is one of the problems SWIP faced. Although we began with a strong desire to pursue avenues for publication outside the academy, in the midst of teaching, taking classes, reading for exams, and writing our dissertations, writing new work for a different audience was a daunting task, and we found ourselves lacking both the time and energy needed to complete this work. Clearly, a major problem is that it was "tacked on" to what we were already doing and not an integral part of that work.

Yet, the problem, as we know, goes deeper than that. Most of us have to contend regularly with the disparagement of public engagement that leads us to approach it as "extra work," as secondary *in value* to our scholarly commitments. SWIP asked a tenured faculty member at our university to host a workshop on public scholarship—a faculty member who is, in fact, known for his public scholarship. We were faced with the advice not to actively pursue public scholarship until tenure, and not to expect our academic commitments to be any less if we do pursue engagement with the public. In other words, expect to do more work and for that work not to be recognized by your colleagues. What do we do with this information? Where does the

change in perspective need to come from? My feeling, and I don't know if I'm right about this, is that it needs to come from graduate students.

We need not to give up on our public commitments, despite the challenges we're facing. Although others might not recognize the relationship between my volunteer work and my academic interests, this is a rich intellectual intersection for me. It gives my academic writing stakes that it wouldn't have otherwise, because serious, detailed research into the complex reasons for the re-segregation of public schools, for example, is needed in order to address this social issue and the severe lack of resources facing schools. I see my pursuit of writing outside the academy as keeping the work I do in the academy accountable, relevant, and dynamic; at the same time, my service reminds me that there are situations in which writing does not suffice to accomplish my academic goals—I must act. Only by insisting on the relevance of this work despite objections to the contrary can we graduate students begin to change the face of what "counts" when it comes time to apply for jobs.

Those of us who pursue public service and public writing must be vocal about the merit of doing so to our colleagues who do not; we must communicate the value of this work to other graduate students in our disciplines. We need to work to establish *larger* forums for discussions of this kind (cross-disciplinary talks and workshops, for example), *and* to open up more dialogue with our current tenured professors and mentors. Within my department, graduate students are given important voice when it comes to hiring new faculty—we need to take opportunities such as these to inquire into candidates' public commitments and their perspective of such work. Such actions could help create a different university culture in that we future faculty might begin to reconsider what is of value when we sit down to decide who to hire in our future departments, rather than defaulting to a privileging of work that maintains the status quo.

For me, being "publicly active" means much more than civic engagement. Being publicly active means being attentive to who my audience is and what the stakes are for my research; it means an insistence on greater transparency about my work. We graduate students specifically need to voice our concerns about the de-valuing of "public contributions"—*if* we really want to build a different university culture that supports opportunities for our scholarship to do real, tangible work in the world.