

Collaboration, Administration, and Community Engagement: One Grad Student's Reflections

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In spring 2007, I began working with a fellow graduate student in Purdue's Rhet/Comp program on a community engagement project that would become the basis for both our dissertations. Allen and I agreed to work together because of our mutual interests in community engagement and public rhetorics, as well as our complementary interests in professional writing and usability (what we would call "his things"), and writing program administration and adult basic education ("my things"). Early in our collaboration, we agreed upon a few fundamental issues:

1. community engagement projects should be sustainable;
2. community engagement should involve collaboration between community and university partners;
3. engagement work, communication among participants, and empirical research should happen continuously and in connection throughout projects.

After much discussion, the project Allen and I came up with is an ongoing collaboration between our community's adult basic literacy organization and Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL). The main result or "product" of this collaboration is an autonomous section of the OWL that is devoted to adult basic literacy, the Community Writing and Education Station (CWEST). Specifically, the section includes resources about GED test preparation, workplace literacy, and English as a Second Language.

Allen and I have spent the past year enlisting the support of our professors and peers, communicating with the community organization's administrators, writing grants and proposals, and drafting CWEST materials. We have thought and re-thought ways to make the CWEST what we envision, which is a sustainable online resource for students and teachers of adult basic literacy created collaboratively with our community's primary adult literacy organization. Finally, we have planned two separate empirical research projects that will study the CWEST's usefulness. These projects use different research methodologies and will be reported in two distinct dissertations, but we hope to connect our research and findings.

The CWEST has given me a unique perspective on community-based work. More specifically, the project involves cooperation between university and community participants, as well as between Allen and me in working on our uniquely collaborative-but-separate dissertations. The project has pushed me to consider the challenges of collaboration, including the university's traditional biases against collaborative scholarship and the logistics of working with a community organization. Additionally, because the project has required me to take on numerous administrative duties like budgeting and communicating with participants, it has given me a unique perspective on the addition of administration to the traditional academic paradigm of teaching, research, and service. This essay offers a reflection on these issues and draws parallels between the collaborative and administrative aspects of community-based work.

Collaboration in Community-Based Work

As a high school student, I was often surprised when my expectations for community volunteer work were not realized. Specifically, I assumed organizations would be grateful for any help they could get from a willing volunteer like me, and I failed to consider their needs, how I could best serve them, or if I was even qualified to help. Though administrators, teachers, and graduate students who plan community engagement projects are generally not as naïve as I was at 15 (we would hope, at least), many of them do have similar expectations when becoming involved with community service projects. In return, they are often met with wary attitudes from community partners, just as I often was as a high school volunteer. Nowhere is this attitude more strongly felt than at a university like my own, where the physical and economic borders between the university and community and the sense that the university has “taken over” the community already lead to tension between community and university members.

Allen and I began the CWEST project aware of these issues because of our past experiences in community projects and our reading about others’ similar experiences. We were concerned at the project’s outset that community members might be wary of working with us. For our part, we were also nervous that our intentions to collaborate with community members might turn into an effort to “save” them or, as we began calling it, to “swoop” in and rescue them. It was easy to decide between ourselves that the project would have a No Swooping policy (when discussing the project and writing documents, we would often keep one another on track by calling out the other’s “swoopiness”), but creating the collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship that we desire with the community partner is a major challenge.

A second challenge we face is a more practical one: collaborating with a community partner can be difficult logistically because community organizations typically work within the constraints of tight budgets, overworked administrators, and part-time employees and volunteers. Though our community’s adult literacy organization has been an ideal partner for this project, concerns still arise. Allen and I are always aware that any time we schedule something with the organization, whether it is a meeting with an administrator or a presentation of our project during a staff meeting, we are adding to the already overburdened schedules of their administrators and teachers. We struggle to maintain the collaborative quality of our project without creating more work for our community partner. This will inevitably become even more of a concern as we move into the research phase of the project, in which more time will be required of voluntary participants.

A final concern about collaboration that the CWEST project has raised for me is the field’s perception of collaborative scholarship. The CWEST is a large project that, put simply, I could not do on my own. Not only does the workload itself require collaboration among multiple people, but the intellectual collaboration between Allen and me has added interesting dimensions to the project that working alone would not have produced. Despite the benefits of collaboration, I have met many surprised faces when I explain that my dissertation is the result of a collaborative project. One of the biggest hurdles in planning my dissertation has been finding ways to show that my work is separate from Allen’s (and therefore valued as “mine”) while still maintaining the benefits of collaboration. Because community-based work often requires such cooperation, enduring biases against collaborative scholarship at the graduate level might

discourage some graduate students from basing their scholarship—particularly high-stakes scholarship like theses and dissertations—on their community work.

Administration in Community-Based Work

The CWEST project has shown me that administrative work is a fundamental part of community engagement. Specifically, the project has required me to learn about and perform budgeting, writing grants and proposals, developing relationships and communicating with university and community participants, and recruiting and supervising other graduate students to work on areas of the project. I have often felt overwhelmed by the administrative work required by the CWEST project. Moreover, my fears about focusing on community-based work early in my career have been compounded by fears about taking on too much administrative responsibility.

Despite these feelings, these administrative experiences have been beneficial to my graduate education. Many, if not most, Rhetoric and Composition faculty will perform administrative work during their careers, whether acting as director of first-year composition or the writing center, mentoring new teaching assistants, or serving on planning committees. Even though many faculty members will have administrative responsibilities, grad school often does not prepare students for administrative work. Encouraging graduate students to take on administrative responsibilities—in community engagement projects or other work—can help prepare students for the administrative work they’ll likely encounter in future faculty positions. Moreover, fostering the perception of administrative work as a valid area of study during graduate education can result in better prepared writing program administrators and also positively shape our field’s perception of administration.

Fostering Community Engagement in Graduate School

Parallel tensions exist for graduate students interested in community engagement, collaboration, and administration. The field’s current interest in community engagement is encouraging, but conventional academic wisdom that community-based work should be put on hold until later in one’s academic career is still present. Graduate students receive similarly mixed messages when they are encouraged to collaborate but experience both the logistical problems that arise in collaboration and negative perceptions toward collaborative scholarship. Finally, graduate students are often told that teaching, research, and service are the three legs of their future profession while observing that many professors work in a fourth leg, administration. In community engagement projects, these tensions are not only parallel, but also connected.

A program that accommodates graduate students’ interest in community-based work can address these tensions by valuing engagement, collaboration, and administration as important areas of study. Being encouraged to perform engagement, collaboration, and administration is a good first step to accommodating graduate students’ interest in such work. Additionally, though, students should be encouraged to study these areas in coursework and to reflect on these experiences and investigate them with empirical research. It is this reflection and research, perhaps, that will most foster sustainable, thoughtful interest in community-based work at the graduate level and explore the ways that such work entails collaboration and administration.