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## Moving Mountains: The Case for Graduate Student Researchers

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## Moving Mountains: The Case for Graduate Student Researchers

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Over the past four decades, the desire to close the gap between academic preparation and professional practice has become a priority in higher education. Pressure from rapidly changing workplaces and declining enrollments are compelling academic program designers to identify and enhance those skills that allow their completers to stand out in the crowded field of entry-level professional practitioners. It is not surprising, therefore, that these changes have resulted in academic curricula that are increasingly aligning to the real world, day-to-day practice in such fields. This trend seems true across a wide range of academic disciplines, from undergraduate programs to entry-level graduate programs, even reaching advanced graduate programs. Across the board, there is a desire to offer internships, practicums, and field experiences that bring pre-professional candidates close to the real-world experiences they will have when entering the workplace.

Sadly, in many social science disciplines, these laudable gains seem to have skipped over the training of candidates to engage with, and contribute to, the empirical knowledge base - otherwise known as research. When it comes to this aspect of academic training, the status quo is that of a wide gulf between those who actively contribute to the knowledge base and those who eventually use these contributions to inform their practice in schools and clinics. This divide persists even though in contemporary workplaces, excellence is increasingly being measured by the degree to which one's practice is driven by current evidence-based innovations. For many professionals already in practice, attempts to hone the skills needed for participation in empirical research can feel like an attempt to dial back the clock. So they proceed in their career uncertain of how best to move the mountain that stands between them and scholarly contribution. Herein lies the challenge at the heart of this issue.

As would be expected when exploring an issue with this level of complexity, many questions come to mind. Can we fix this? How do we bridge this gap between preparation and practice in social science research? Where do we begin to mend fissures

that were created over many decades? Unfortunately, in a short treatise such as this one, there is not enough space to do justice to all of these profound questions. Our purpose in this editorial therefore is less ambitious than would be expected given the breadth of the issue. Our goal, put simply, is to highlight how the mentoring of graduate student researchers can serve as an important step toward addressing the larger problem of bridging the gap between research and practice.

We strongly believe that a key to the advancement of knowledge that will be readily appreciated by practitioners lies in our ability to demystify the research process early in the training of future practitioners. In other words, we need to give priority to the preparation of graduate students who are ready to contribute, even in small measures, to the body of research. We need to make the process practical, accessible, and laudable. We need to make it clear to graduate students that this aspect of their training is as relevant as any other part of their professional preparation. We must do this as a matter of priority.

Before we go into the details of our proposal, let us first highlight some arguments often presented against taking graduate students' research contributions seriously.

1. Graduate students lack the depth of knowledge required for conducting meaningful research. Their work will therefore dilute the literature.
2. Graduate students do not have the time to do quality research.
3. The vast majority of graduate students do not plan to actively engage in research in their careers.
4. Many master's degree programs no longer require a thesis as a capstone project.
5. High-impact journals will rarely publish original research conducted by graduate students.

Admittedly, each of these arguments has some degree of merit. For instance, if they rely solely on their course work, graduate students are often not ready to engage in high-quality research. Similarly, the demands of graduate education, family, and work commitments can be overwhelming and leave little room for independent research. And yes, sadly, many scholarly journals are reluctant to publish graduate student scholarship for reasons that are not entirely clear. To cap it all, few masters-level graduate programs require a thesis, a hitherto guaranteed opportunity to engage in reviewed scholarship.

In spite of these challenges, we maintain that scholarship is a core ideal of graduate education. Scholarship, by nature, demands the generation of new knowledge, not just the mere

consumption of knowledge built up from past generations. What then becomes of graduate education stripped of this essential ingredient? What becomes of our disciplines if graduate students continue to leave the academy without a strong buy-in to this ideal? What confidence can we have in the veracity of our day to day professional practice if this disconnect is allowed to thrive? Sadly, sincere answers to these questions may hit much closer to home than we may find comfortable.

Yet, it is not too late for us to commit to reversing this trend. A good starting place may be creating pathways for seamless transitions between the teaching of research methods and the practice of scholarship at the graduate school level. Such pathways would enable graduate students to link their research experiences as students with their practice as professionals. In doing so, we would increase the likelihood that candidates make the same firm connection between training and practice in the area of research that they appear to already be making in other areas of their training. So how can we make this happen? What new ideas do we bring? Our proposal is not necessarily new. Rather it is a call for faculty and graduate students in the social sciences to work together toward creating the following opportunities.

1. Opportunities for students to collaborate with faculty mentors in the generation of scholarly work.
2. Opportunities for students and faculty to experience the peer review process (either as authors or as editors and reviewers) at a level commensurate with their interest and ability.

Graduate-level professional training should ultimately prepare candidates to become scholarly-minded practitioners. There is a wealth of empirical evidence to indicate that activities requiring active participation, and mentorships, as opposed to the passive listening and regurgitation of facts, are well suited for this type of preparation. Effective collaboration and mentorship, however, require a strong commitment from all parties. A commitment from students to seek out research opportunities and a commitment from faculty to foster them. These opportunities can be found as part of regular coursework, in conference presentations, and in journal publication. Creating graduate school cultures where such opportunities are prevalent needs to be at the heart of what we do, and a cause to which we must commit resources, time, and energy.

Let us leave you with these final thoughts for your consideration. If you are faculty reading this, we ask that you

consider mentoring a graduate student researcher. Whether you are well versed in current research practice or you will be pursuing familiarity with the current empirical culture alongside your mentee, trust that your wisdom, vulnerability, and passion will result in a priceless experience for both of you. If you are a graduate student reading this, we encourage you to stake out a research interest and collaborate with a faculty mentor who will help guide your interest. Overall, we hope that both faculty and graduate student researchers will view our editorial team as their partner in this all-important endeavor. As a team, we are confident in our journal's potential to support you in this manner. After all, being current and past graduate students ourselves, we share a common experience and understand the joys and pains of graduate student publication. We also recognize, more so than others, that this is no easy task given the aforementioned challenges. However, if we care enough about graduate student scholarship, then even this mountain will move.