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PREPARING DOCTORAL STUDENTS FOR SCHOLAR COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

One of the great barriers to success for junior faculty is their romanticized image of the professoriate as an occupation marked by individual expertise and self-sufficient scholarship. As doctoral students, we tend to see the Ph.D. process as preparation for that self-sufficient existence rather than training for socialization into a community of scholars. According to Robert Boice [2000], "naiveté about the socialization process of the professoriate" leads to "failures and miseries." This paper builds on my experience as a doctoral student under Gary W. Dickson's mentorship at the University of Minnesota to explore the importance of scholar communities and the need to train doctoral students to actively create, grow, and sustain such mutually-beneficial entities.

Keywords: scholar communities, graduate school experience, junior faculty, mentorship

I. LESSON ONE

Scholar communities are an essential means of survival for junior faculty members. However, many graduates leave their graduate school experience and find themselves at a loss in their new environment. For one, the scaffolding of mentorship and research communities that was central to their experience in graduate school is often not available, and they find themselves standing alone with the daunting demands of tenure looming over them. Moreover, these new members of the academy may assume the scholar community that was foundational to their success as graduate students is no longer necessary now that they have acquired their passport to the profession: the Ph.D. They accept the romantic view that a Ph.D. validates their ability to do it all on their own.

According to Robert Boice [2000], "naiveté about the socialization process of the professoriate" leads to "failures and miseries." For some, the "socialization process" Boice refers to here is simply networking and sharing ideas at conferences and other scholarly gatherings. However, these experiences can be so intermittent and fleeting that they have little impact on an individual's research, and they certainly provide scant support for real scholarship. In my experience, the key to successful socialization as a junior professor lies in the creation of scholar communities akin to what many had in their graduate school experience. Far from being independent and self-sufficient scholars batting out our research, we should see ourselves as members of a team seeking to support and mentor one another as fellow scholars.

Lesson 1: Doctoral programs that create and nurture scholar communities model an environment for young scholars to succeed in the profession.

It is a snowy day outside. The fire is burning brightly in the fireplace. The pieces of logs and coals coming together build a strong fire. A new log that is added to the fire soon ignites as it lies against the embers from the other logs. Taken aside, the log would soon lose its fire. In the community of other logs, the log burns and produces heat.

As a graduate student, I was very much like the log that was waiting to be included in a pile of other burning logs. I saw that fire of enthusiasm for research among my colleagues at the University of Minnesota. There were several fires burning, and I had to find the area that suited me. In a research seminar, I learned about the program of research in group decision support systems (GDSS) and took an interest in it. I talked to Professor Gary Dickson about the possibility of joining that research group. The research group was comprised of professors and graduate students from different departments, including communications, computer science, and management information systems. There was constant discussing of ideas, and the graduate students involved in the program could investigate a part of the research stream to create a significant body of GDSS research at the university.

A seminal article by DeSanctis and Gallupe [1987] defined the different levels of support provided by the GDSS and their impacts on group decision making. This article helped to establish several important studies on GDSS at Minnesota. Several senior students in the program had looked at the impact of GDSS on decision making using Level I systems where the GDSS was aimed at facilitating communication among group members. Having understood some of the impacts of Level I systems, we proceeded to add another level of complexity to the research program. We started to look at Level II and possibly Level III systems where process and task structuring mechanisms were provided to reduce uncertainties associated with the group decision making process. The first project that I undertook in the area was with Professors Gary Dickson and Laura Robinson; we investigated the effect of different modes of running a group support system, namely self-executed, chauffeured, and facilitated. My Ph.D. thesis was built on this branch of the research stream.

Even in this research branch, I saw that I needed to discuss ideas and open myself to the help of many others to get the project going. The research would not have been possible if I did not have the help of Gary Dickson, who was my main mentor throughout the program, and the advice of Scott Poole and Gerry DeSanctis. There also were others who helped to get the GDSS in working condition and assisted in conducting the experiments for my dissertation work.

What really impressed me as a graduate student was the way these well-established professors worked together on research. As knowledgeable and proficient as they were, these scholars saw the benefits of working in a research community. As I look back on it, this was probably the greatest lesson I learned in graduate school. I was fortunate to be in constant contact with a close-knit group of people working on a common research project. Further, I was around other graduate students working toward the same goal, and this created an environment that helped to build a significant body of research. The small ember that was in me at the beginning of the program was getting stronger. In my experience, it is relatively easier to build this fire in graduate school because the environment surrounding the graduate student is made of many like-minded individuals.

I believe my experience as a graduate student is not unlike the experience of others. Graduate school not only sets the student the task of conducting quality research and writing a successful dissertation, but it also provides the student with the infrastructure to help that student succeed: mentor relationships, peer relationships, and a vibrant scholar community. Upon graduation, however, the scholar entering the professoriate might not enjoy the same type of research environment. Some novice professors find their research going cold in what seems to them a less welcoming and less nurturing environment; others learn quickly that they need to join or establish their own scholar communities.

II. LESSON TWO

Lesson 2: The new professor needs to find ways to create a sustainable research environment, including being creative and flexible, and building relationships with colleagues in and outside his or her discipline.

Upon completing my Ph.D. program, I became a junior faculty member at a major research university. As GDSS research was not a priority at the university, I was not able to extend my research area due to a lack of resources to build a GDSS infrastructure. It also was difficult to find people with whom to discuss my ideas. I presented some of my GDSS work in conferences, but to actually continue that stream of research felt like an insurmountable task. If I intended to build my professorial career, I would need to continue to publish. Going on to other research areas was a possibility, but having spent a significant amount of my graduate time on group work, I was not willing to give it up so readily. What I needed to do was to find others interested in group-related types of research. This was where it became important to build relationships with others so that they knew what I was interested in doing. I was interested in group dynamics and found others with similar types of interests, albeit in different areas.

Initiating a new scholar community simply involved talking with others. Sometimes in meeting with colleagues over a cup of tea or coffee, we would chat about our research interests. Such informal chats did not lead immediately to research collaboration, but it was a way to get the ball rolling. It was through one of these informal sessions that I told a colleague from the management department about my group work. He alerted me to a group that he and another colleague were trying to establish with colleagues from the law school. I was interested in his proposal as it looked at conflict resolution in groups. We soon formed a study group of nine members coming from the School of Management, Law School, and the Psychology and Social Work Department in the School of Arts and Social Sciences. As a group, we set aside time twice a month to meet, often with refreshments. Initially, we did not have a fixed agenda as we were simply brainstorming on what the group could do in teaching and research. Eventually, we established realistic targets for the group and soon drew up a teaching and research plan.

As the focus of the group was on conflict resolution, we wanted to start up a new interdisciplinary course of study on negotiation and mediation. This program was based on experiential learning where the students would take the key concepts covered for each topic and apply them through case study discussions and role play. The students were also required to reflect on their learning experience for each class session and had to write an annotated reflection on their overall learning experience for the entire course. This study program was introduced to twenty-four students from various schools within the university. This interdisciplinary interaction for the students was a first for many of them. Based on feedback obtained from the students, we learned that the experiential learning and reflection were extremely effective learning tools. When we next introduced the course, we had an overwhelming response from the students for the course and were not able to accommodate all of them. Later, we mounted two similar courses at the undergraduate and graduate level in the School of Business.

Besides teaching, we also developed our research and obtained a substantial grant for our work in conflict management. Through that grant, we provided faculty development funds to those of us who needed training on conflict resolution methods to enhance our teaching of the negotiation/mediation course. We also sought the interest of researchers and practitioners on alternative dispute resolution and organized two major conferences. The result of these conferences was an edited book.

Our bimonthly discussion as a group also led us to projects that contributed actively to the general community. For example, some of us were involved in the family court to help with divorce mediation, while others volunteered in other court mediations. We went to some elementary schools to help them set up peer-mediation programs for the students. Some of us extended our service to trade associations. This outreach to the community enabled us to bring to our research and teaching practical examples of various dispute resolution methods in different

groups. As a result of this collaboration, I was able to generate an edited book, book chapters, and some journal articles. I found that the fundamentals of my GDSS work at the University of Minnesota could be successfully applied to other group-related research, as long as I was flexible and willing to connect with researchers from other disciplines.

As my experience illustrates, junior faculty can replicate the atmosphere of scholar communities that many find in their graduate school experience in order to facilitate continued scholarship. However, as junior faculty members move up the promotion ladder on their way toward tenure, they may all too easily reap the individual benefits of scholar communities without recognizing their ethical responsibility toward the next generation of scholars and their scholar communities.

III. LESSON THREE

Lesson 3: Professors should help doctoral students develop a passion for research in scholar communities, and these students, in turn, are responsible for sustaining and building the next-generation scholar communities.

Our commitment to scholar communities should extend beyond our own personal research and publication agendas. Scholar communities help us acclimate to our new university; they create bonds between researchers (often of an interdisciplinary nature) that strengthen the teaching and research of the university; they produce vibrant and extensive research beyond what one individual could achieve; and, bringing us back to where we started, they model for our own graduate students the interdependent values of the research community.

Gary Dickson first shared with me the GDSS research program and modeled for me the benefits of working in a scholar community rather than on my own. Through working with the GDSS group, I saw the scholar community in practice. Upon graduation and working as a junior professor, I found it could be difficult to continue the same research agenda. If I were to work alone, that part of my research investment would have been wasted. But I found other colleagues to form yet another scholar community to support and complement my research interests.

I benefited in numerous ways from the scholar community model, and so it seemed only right that I should pass on that experience to young scholars at my university. The dispute resolution scholar community that I helped to establish in my university did not exist to simply help the individuals involved “churn out” papers. Besides helping the community in tangible ways and contributing to innovative course offerings, we shared our experience with a number of graduate students who were included in our scholar community. We shared with them the same passion that Gary shared with me.

What is important is to convey the message that building the scholar community is an active and ongoing process. One branch of the scholar community can be extended into another scholar community. While there are many ideas we should share with graduate students and junior faculty, there may be none as important as the lesson that professors are not self-sufficient. Our students need to learn that research does not have to be an isolated, individualistic activity, but can (and I would say, *should*) be done in communities of mutual scholarly interest and support. Our students need to learn, finally, that they are responsible for building and sustaining the next scholar communities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joo Eng Lee-Partridge is professor of MIS at Central Connecticut State University. She studied under Gary Dickson at the University of Minnesota and taught at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include online pedagogy, knowledge management, conflict management and group decision support systems.

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