

Rethinking graduate student socialization and identification: how the communication discipline can help

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Almost 20 years ago, Nyquist (2002) wrote, “the university’s most important product is not expertise, research, knowledge, information, or service. It is the student” (p. 14). Nyquist’s multidisciplinary effort to re-envision graduate education illustrated its import and variability in the United States. Since then, the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically (Carey, 2020). Economic and social forces (both internal and external to higher education), as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, have forced institutions to question their labor models, pushed students to question the value of their training, and driven taxpayers to question universities’ economic benefits. Simultaneously, graduate students at both master’s and doctoral levels have become more numerous, diverse, and interested in pursuing careers outside academe (Walker et al., 2009).

Faculty have developed curricula to engage students in critical thinking, perform innovative and ethical research, and shape positive societal change. Yet, graduate students still struggle during socialization (the process of organizational and professional identification, where students gain the knowledge, skills, and core values necessary for career success; Bullis & Bach, 1989). Some scholars argue faculty should mentor graduate students for different landscapes than those for which they were trained (Walker et al., 2009). Although the graduate student socialization and identification process has been discussed for more than 30 years, little has changed in practice (Helm et al., 2012).

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Communication education scholars are uniquely situated to contribute to the academic conversation about graduate students' professional identification and how faculty and universities support these processes. As scholars of organizational discourse, we can train graduate students to interrogate systemic and hegemonic power structures, preparing them to advocate for and lead more equitable organizations. Kezar and DePaola (2018) considered how universities are shaped by neoliberal practices. When capitalistic economic models are applied to higher education, reward systems reflect those values. In this system, faculty must often focus on generating grant revenue and publishing. Graduate students extend the research enterprise, both as *teaching assistants* so faculty can focus on their scholarly endeavors, and as *research assistants* trained to advance and replicate faculty mentors' research. Deetz's (1992) work on discursive closure and organizational micropractices illuminates how these systematic power structures limit graduate students' agency.

Organizational power structures also affect marginalized students' socialization experiences. Graduate students of color report different experiences than their white counterparts (Harris & Lee, 2019). It is faculty members' responsibility to recognize what communicative practices may be reifying structural inequities, both in our discipline and in higher education broadly. The heated #commsowhite discussion on the CRTNET listserv during the summer of 2019, along with the "Communication Scholars for Transformation" Facebook page, demonstrate the immense need for re-examination of socialization practices in all disciplines.

Currently, teaching and research assistantships often do not socialize graduate students for careers outside the professoriate. Communication scholars might explore alternative models or partnerships (such as those with government agencies and nonprofit organizations) that could support students for externships or other research-focused careers. Moreover, as many graduate students are digital natives, they may bring more innovation to remote learning than veteran faculty.

Given the coronavirus pandemic, we do not know how higher education will be delivered in the future in terms of content, platform, or even location. As faculty roles have changed, few university reward

systems have kept up (Kezar & DePaola, 2018). Communication scholars could apply extant communication theory to consider how change in higher education affects faculty members' organizational identities, particularly in the context of training graduate students (Walker et al., 2009). Creating flexible paths to success has a downstream effect; faculty may attend to graduate students' socialization if the system encourages it (Kezar & DePaola, 2018).

Simply calling for more effective mentoring will not assist future scholars in their reform of higher education. We must attend to this issue at both system and individual levels. As Dannels et al. (2014) argue,

we all, as communication scholars and teachers, have a social contract to understand, model, and enact those communication qualities that we believe matter. If we can do this, we can tackle the big questions, and maybe even tackle the system. (p. 379)

The aforementioned challenges in graduate student socialization and identification illustrate the broad, systemic change required to address higher education's longstanding problems with equity and viability in the United States. Communication scholars have an opportunity to apply our skills to improving the health of colleges and universities. We have a wealth of scholarship about effective practices in undergraduate education but know less about effective design and communication pedagogy for graduate students. This knowledge gap presents a challenge as we seek to develop more effective and equitable programs. What organizational and discursive practices have limited our implementation of new strategies? How can/do strategies translate across disciplines?

We cannot rely solely on faculty who teach master's and doctoral students to solve these intractable problems. What are the roles of undergraduate faculty in recruiting and anticipatorily socializing promising students (particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds) to graduate school? How might communication scholarship promote effective teaching and mentoring of graduate students? What are the next steps to developing and evaluating programs to meet the needs of graduate students diverse in

both identity backgrounds and career interests? How might we better prepare graduate students for a range of careers in, and especially outside of, academia?

Existing socialization and identification frameworks used to acclimate and support graduate students have not yielded needed results. If they choose to become professors, we are inviting them to work in an inequitable and economically unstable system using antiquated tools. If they choose to pursue careers in industry, they lack the training needed to navigate the environment. Our current graduate students will become the faculty and professionals of the future; we must train them for the universities and industries we aspire to, rather than those we have now.

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