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Next Generation Practitioner-Scholars Navigating Community Engagement Professional Development: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This collaborative autoethnographic research study examines the motivations, experiences, and professional outcomes of seven community engagement practitioner-scholars who served in a high-level elected position in a community engagement research association and its affiliated graduate student network. The findings highlight the role of professional associations and graduate student networks in facilitating professional development for next generation community engagement practitioner-scholars, such as supporting them in creating connections, expanding networks, developing professional identities, and cultivating cultural capital.

Keywords: graduate students, professional associations, leadership, collaborative research

Graduate students are increasingly “committed to equality, social justice, civic duty, and the public purposes of higher education” (Doberneck et al., 2017, p. 122), which warrants more attention to the development of their community-engaged teaching, scholarship, and service than in past generations. Doberneck et al. (2017) and other scholars (e.g., Dostilio, 2017; Kniffin et al., 2016; Morin et al., 2016; O’Meara, 2008a; Post et al., 2016) have explored what is needed to develop the next generation of community engagement (CE) practitioner-scholars. We use the term CE practitioner-scholars here to refer to individuals in the CE field who practi-

ctice, support, and/or study service learning and/or CE, including but not limited to faculty, students, and professional staff in higher education or community settings (i.e., non-profit professionals, community organizers). While existing literature examines the role of academic graduate programs in the development of CE practitioner-scholars, less has been written about the role of professional associations and networks. To this end, this study examines how service in a high-level, elected position in a CE professional association and network facilitated professional development for early career CE practitioner-scholars.

Specifically, this exploratory qualitative research study examined the motivations, experiences, and professional outcomes of individuals who served as chair and chair-elect of the International Association on Research in Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) Graduate Student Network (GradSN). As an affiliate member interest group of IARSLCE, the mission of the GradSN is to cultivate a community of emerging scholars in the field of service learning and community engagement (SLCE), which is accomplished through professional development, mentorship, and networking opportunities (IARSLCE, n.d.). The GradSN was established in 2008, and as of the completion of this study, seven individuals served as chair or chair-elect of the network¹.

Responsibilities of and learning opportunities for the chair include, but are not limited to:

- convening a group of graduate students virtually;
- serving on the IARSLCE board and liaising between graduate students and the board;
- learning about association policies and politics;
- serving on additional committees or projects as appropriate;
- supporting annual conference planning; and
- mentoring and supporting successors in the chair role and other elected roles.

By examining the responsibilities, opportunities, and related experiences of those who served as chair, our study presents a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which positional leadership (i.e., formal roles) in a CE professional association and network facilitated professional development for CE practitioner-scholars.

We begin by situating our study within current literature on the professional development of early career CE practitioner-scholars

and graduate students. Next, we describe the study's research design and approach to data analysis. We then present the findings and discuss three major themes that emerged, as well as the strengths and limitations of the study. Lastly, we discuss implications and provide recommendations for practice and research.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for this study primarily came from our experiences as chair of the GradSN. Four of us—a chair-elect, chair, immediate past-chair, and former chair—were on a conference call to discuss a GradSN strategic plan. While working on the strategic plan together, we began reflecting on our experiences with the network and association, from which surfaced that we each professionally benefited from our time as chair (and even chair-elect). For example, we developed relevant knowledge and skills and connected to mentors that helped us further our professional careers in CE. As CE practitioner-scholars, we were also aware of scholarly work being done around competency development for CE practitioner-scholars and also for graduate students interested in CE. Competency development is a growing area of focus within the CE field, including the recent development of CE competencies for graduate and professional students (Doberneck et al., 2017) and early career community engagement professionals (Dostilio, 2017). While identifying what competencies are needed for the professional development of CE practitioner-scholars is necessary, it is not enough. We must also examine, in more depth, the ways those competencies—and professional development in general—are fostered.

While many established CE practitioner-scholars adopted a CE emphasis in their research, teaching, and practice mid-to-late career, the current research and the authors' experiences suggest “next-

¹ Five of the seven chairs are also authors of this article. Therefore, we use first person when discussing the participants of the study.

generation” practitioner-scholars choose to integrate CE into their scholarship and practice in earlier stages of their career (Post et al., 2016). Socialization toward CE scholarship and practice can begin early on in academic graduate programs, as well as extend into participation in professional networks and associations (O’Meara, 2008a). Morin et al. (2016) note a recent positive trend indicating more graduate students are completing CE dissertations, engaging in interdisciplinary research, and joining CE networks and associations than a decade ago. Despite progress in these areas, challenges remain for both early career CE practitioner-scholars and graduate students to find opportunities to develop professionally.

Drawing from our own experiences, we know that prior to entering graduate school, CE practitioner-scholars may encounter difficulty selecting a graduate program open to CE scholarship. Graduate students may also find difficulty choosing advisors and developing committees that have the skills and knowledge to understand and support CE dissertations (Franz, 2013; Jaeger et al., 2011). Differences in the norms and expectations from various degree programs and fields present additional hurdles. Community engagement dissertations can be found in higher numbers in certain fields of study (e.g., education and public health) than in other fields, perhaps because professional degree programs in these fields often have a strong community presence (Jaeger et al., 2014). However, DelNero (2017) found that in other fields, such as biomedical engineering, CE is implicitly in tension with conventional scholarship or even discouraged, potentially leading emerging practitioner-scholars to “perpetuate traditional attitudes toward teaching, research, and service” (p. 105). Moreover, graduate students committed to CE must navigate and attempt to integrate the field of CE and their field of study. This includes mastering the foundational scholarship of engagement and collaboration, as well as foundational scholarship in their disciplinary field (Doberneck et al., 2017).

Further, even if graduate students are able to pursue CE research or teaching opportunities within their graduate program, continuing to do so in their professional teaching, research, or practice post-graduation may be difficult. Graduate students may find that challenges they faced as students extend into the faculty reward systems, where promotion and tenure structures often undervalue CE. There can be challenges to obtaining funding for CE projects or inadequate institutional support to continue this type of work (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). For example, many grants are designed to award funding to a “primary investigator” rather than collaborative teams (Kniffin & Janke, 2019), and CE practitioner-scholars may not find these systems align with their collaborative scholarship.

To address some of these challenges, Kniffin et al. (2016) advocate that established professionals in the field create “front doors” (i.e., direct entry points) for early career CE practitioner-scholars (e.g., through doctoral programs centered on CE theory and practice) instead of expecting these graduate students and early career professionals to navigate and negotiate their own way into the field. These front doors may currently be found within formal learning settings, such as graduate programs and certificates. For example, Merrimack College offers a Master of Education in Community Engagement graduate degree (Merrimack College, n.d.). Similarly, Michigan State University offers a Graduate Certificate in Community Engagement program that can be added on to the primary graduate program of any graduate or professional student currently enrolled at the university (Michigan State University, n.d.). However, other front doors may be found within non-formal learning settings, such as professional networks and associations.

As previously outlined, IARSLCE supports a Graduate Student Network (GradSN) that is designed to connect, mentor, and prepare graduate students for CE research, teaching, and practice. Additional similar programs offered by other professional

associations include the Imagining America (IA) Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows program (Imagining America, n.d.) and the Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC) Emerging Engagement Scholars Workshop (EESW) (Engagement Scholarship Consortium, n.d.). While formal graduate programs and certificates may certainly help address the challenge of finding support for CE research, teaching, and practice while in graduate school, opportunities found through professional associations may offer support both during and after formal graduate education.

In this study, we examined our own experiences as chair of the GradSN to better understand the role of CE professional associations and networks in the development of early career CE practitioner-scholars. The primary research question guiding this study was: How do the past-chairs, chair, and chair-elect of the IARSLCE GradSN describe their experiences of navigating community engagement professional development as part of this role? The secondary research questions were: (a) What were their motivations for entering into this role? (b) What significant experiences have they had as a result of being in this role? (c) What has been the impact of being in this role, in terms of their professional development?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As CE practitioner-scholars, we value creating democratic processes for generating knowledge. Therefore, we chose to employ a collaborative autoethnographic method to create an inclusive and collaborative process to generate and analyze data in this study. Autoethnography is “an approach to qualitative inquiry in which a researcher recounts a story of [their] own personal experience, coupled with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of that experience” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 589). Data sources in autoethnographic studies include individual reflective writing based on prompts

that encourage a “critically reflexive lens” towards self-identification, inclusivity, inter-sectional, and positionality (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 214).

Collaboration adds rigor to the interpretation of self-narratives: “When several researchers work together, the different disciplinary and experiential perspectives they bring to bear can deepen the analytical and interpretive components” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 598). Collaborative autoethnography has been used to explore experiences with third spaces in teacher education (Taylor et al., 2014), identity in education (Toyosaki et al., 2009), and motherhood (Geist-Martin et al., 2010), where individual self-narratives are probed and expanded to provide an understanding that is an “additive accumulation of these insights” (Geist-Martin et al., 2010, p. 12). Ngunjiri et al. (2010) offer an iterative four-step process of collaborative ethnography that includes:

- (1) self-writing and reflection subsequently shared and probed in a preliminary round of data collection;
- (2) a second round of self-writing, sharing, and probing built on preliminary data and analysis;
- (3) data analysis and interpretation involving a first round of individual data review and coding followed by collective meaning-making; and
- (4) an initial stage of individual report writing followed by final group writing.

In the following sections, we describe how we adapted this process to fit the goals of the study.

Participant Selection and Sample

In this exploratory qualitative study, we used purposive sampling (Chein, 1981) to select seven participant-researchers who represent each of the chairs as of 2018 (five past-chairs, one current chair, and one chair-elect [all henceforth referred to as chairs]). Purposive sampling focuses on selecting a sample from which the most can be learned, and the sample is selected “precisely because

of their special experience and competence” (Chein, 1981, p. 440). Although there are other active members of the GradSN, the chair historically spends more time engaged in the administrative and organizational tasks of the GradSN. Additionally, the chair serves as a voting member of and liaison to the IARSLCE board. These additional responsibilities make the positional role of chair unique in what it both requires and offers to those elected to this role.

Each of the seven participant-researchers agreed to co-develop the research design of this study and were all listed as researchers in our Institutional Review Board proposal, which was approved before data collection. All seven participants identify as White, cisgender females, from the United States, and had completed or were pursuing doctoral degrees related to education at the time of this study. The participants held various professional roles during data collection, including one nonprofit professional, one tenured faculty member, one administrator, one hybrid administrator and tenured faculty member, and three enrolled graduate students with full-time professional roles in education.

Subjectivity Statement

Our identities are both the subject of this research and a dynamic component of our research lens. In this section, we reflect on how our salient identities influenced our study, as we believe it is important to share our identities as both the participants and researchers of this study so other practitioner-scholars can contextualize and problematize our work. While we previously shared information about all seven participant-researchers in the sample description, this subjectivity statement represents only the thoughts of this paper’s authors. We represent the participant-researchers who most influenced the development of the research design, the data analysis, and the final writing.

Our identities as White women from the United States who were each completing doctoral degrees while chair are particularly relevant given our leadership role in an

association like IARSLCE. Since the association is international in scope, and the GradSN is open to members seeking any graduate degree, one might expect more diverse identities in its leadership. Yet, the homogenous make-up of the chairs in terms of race, gender, nationality, and degree type does not reflect the diversity of CE practitioner-scholars and graduate students in the GradSN, IARSLCE, or the larger CE field. We are aware that it is problematic that the homogeneity of those in leadership roles is not reflective of the heterogeneity of the broader field. This awareness grew during analysis and final writing and led us to reflect on the process by which we determined the purpose of this study.

Our identities aided our entry into the chair role (i.e., being invited/mentored by other White women with doctoral degrees), as well as access to resulting professional development through this role. Throughout the study, we have weighed the benefits to the CE field of investing time and energy to share our own experiences versus interrogating the role of identity, power, and privilege in CE professional development. Ultimately, our experiences with this study have called us to use our insider status to the GradSN to begin to uncover, highlight, and challenge the practices and structures that may have led to this lack of diversity in its leadership.

While the focus of this essay is to problematize CE professional development, it is also important to note that issues of identity and equity are also relevant in CE work itself. Service-learning courses often send students who are predominantly White and privileged (Becker & Paul, 2015) into communities of color. This can perpetuate White saviorism by producing situations where White students “help” or “serve” communities of color or issues of “double consciousness” where students of color may be “conflicted about doing the ‘serving’ when there are members of [their] community who remain ‘those served’” (Hickmon, 2015, p. 86). Our Whiteness in particular has implications both for this study and in our practice of CE.

While recognizing key similarities, we also note that what differentiates us are our disciplinary backgrounds, including adult education, higher education, urban education, educational and cultural studies, public administration, environmental education, and leadership studies. This disciplinary diversity led us to consult a breadth of scholarly areas in both our study design and the data analysis. We also have varying years of experience in the CE field (e.g., early career to post-tenure), and we have held different and sometimes simultaneous roles during this study, including student, graduate assistant, staff, faculty, and nonprofit professional. Our diversity of academic and professional backgrounds and experiences provided varied and rich perspectives from which to approach data analysis and writing.

Recognizing we each had unique personal and professional circumstances, we carefully approached our research process with attention toward flexibility and inclusivity. Chang et al. (2016) describe the difficulty of including just four people in their collaborative autoethnography; therefore, as a group of five authors (and seven participant-researchers), we knew attention to our process was needed. Our respective professional roles and personal commitments evolved throughout the course of this research project (spanning over two years), which impacted our availability to collaborate. These challenges were likely heightened due to the nature of graduate student life, in addition to academic career progression.

Throughout the study, we used conference calls and email to check in with each other about our multiple roles, made our commitments transparent, and allowed flexibility in our levels of engagement in the project as needed. This practice allowed us to include everyone to some extent within various stages of the study. We collectively maintained meaningful group discussions throughout the project—making this project not the sum of many parts, but rather a collaborative creation. Finally, making clear

our guidelines, timeline, minimum participant expectations, and overall goals enabled us to develop a flexible and inclusive process.

Co-Developing a Process

Using Ngunjiri et al.'s (2010) four-stage iterative process to guide our own process, we designed a study that would meet our research goals. Our process included six stages with varying levels of participation from each of the participant-researchers. We used a “concurrent” mode of “partial” collaboration (Chang et al., 2016, pp. 42-45), which means we kept a steady pace with each other throughout a mix of individual and collective activities. All seven of us engaged in the initial writing stages of the research process prior to analysis, but only the named authors continued through to the final writing stage.

Stage One: Developing Research Writing Prompts (Five Participants)

Using the research questions as a guide, we generated three writing prompts and established a one- to two-page limit for each prompt. A shared, web-based word processing document was created for each of us to use in drafting and sharing our responses to the three reflective writing prompts. The writing prompts based on our research sub-questions were as follows: (1) What were your motivations for entering into this role? (2) What significant experiences have you had as a result of being in this role? (3) What has been the impact of being in this role in terms of your professional development?

Stage Two: First Self-Writing (Seven Participants)

Over the course of three weeks, we each crafted our individual narratives in response to the three writing prompts. Each participant was assigned a web-based word processing document for drafting their reflections, which we were all given access to view. Total word counts for each narrative ranged from approximately 1,250-1,750 words inclusive of all three questions.

Stage Three: Probing (Three Participants)

In the following two weeks, we read through each narrative and provided comments to probe for additional information, thoughts, and feelings (Chang et al., 2016). For example, one person wrote that she “facilitated connections for graduate students.” During the probing phase, she was asked: “Why did these connections matter to you?” Other prompts asked for more in-depth information about the stories being told, as the experiences of the participant-researchers span over a decade, and the GradSN and the chair role have evolved during that time. This probing response strategy allowed us to highlight areas that could be expanded upon to better answer our research questions (Chang, 2008; Chang et al., 2016).

Stage Four: Second Self-Writing (Seven Participants)

Over the course of the next two weeks, we responded to any probes in our self-writing with additional details. This process yielded expansion of each narrative in focused areas, adding “depth to personal interrogation” (Chang et al., 2016, p. 24). For example, when responding to the prompt “Why did these connections matter to you?” one person added that such connections were “instrumental in [her] personal and professional growth” and that many of the people she met through the GradSN had become her “dear friends.” This stage of writing yielded depth and clarity to previous writing.

Stage Five: Analysis (Five Participants)

In the month following our second self-writing, we engaged in an iterative process of reading, discussing, and coding the narratives. Details on this process are provided in the expanded data analysis section of this paper.

Stage Six: Final Writing (Five Participants)

Per our research guidelines developed at the onset, all participants were invited to this stage of final writing (i.e., to co-present at the IARSLCE conference and to co-write this article). The five named authors presented

initial findings at the IARSLCE annual conference (Kniffin et al., 2018) with input from our two other colleagues. Following the conference, the five named authors also agreed to revisit the analysis and continue to generate learning through this final writing stage, which has occurred over approximately two years.

Data Analysis

Analysis began during the probing stage (stage 3) when three of us read the self-writing and added comments and questions. In reading all of the initial narratives, we gained a sense of trends in the data. After the second self-writing (stage 4), four of us completed a first round of coding and then had a discussion to determine how we would approach further coding and analysis (stage 5). In preparation for the discussion, we each applied an open coding procedure directly into the narrative files (in alphabetical order), where we each generated our own codes to represent any emerging ideas or themes and capture all analytic possibilities (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2016). This exercise allowed us to explore coding using a web-based word processing document, understand how each person applied open codes, and examine the ways our open codes aligned with previous thinking from stage 3. This process helped to ensure reliability in our data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the discussion following the first round of coding, we observed that how we each applied codes was similar (i.e., the way we created codes, the amount of codes per section), but we determined that a second round of coding was needed to bring greater clarity to the emerging themes. We also determined that using a web-based word processing document was difficult, in terms of creating and organizing codes as a group, so we chose to use a web-based mixed-methods data analysis software (Dedoose Version 7.0.23) in our second round of coding.

In our second round, we applied a concept coding procedure (Saldaña, 2016) within Dedoose. Concept codes are words or short phrases that symbolically carry a larger

meaning beyond a single item or action that is tangible or apparent, e.g., a clock (a single tangible item) versus time (a broader intangible idea). Our concept codes came from an emergent conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016), which we developed during the discussion following our first round of coding. This emergent conceptual framework (see Table 1) was guided by our first round of coding, as well as a set of scholarly publications that together influenced our choice of concept codes and our second round of coding.

Front Doors Versus Winding Pathways

First, the concept code *front doors versus winding pathways* was guided by Kniffin et al.'s (2016) thought piece on practitioner-scholar entry into CE. Front doors are conceptualized as direct invitations to professional development opportunities, such as the chair role itself or the IARSLCE mentoring program. Winding pathways are conceptualized as indirect connections to opportunities, such as finding unofficial mentors on one's own. Our initial discussions and first round coding highlighted both direct and indirect opportunities connected to our experiences as chair, and we selected this concept code to analyze this overarching phenomenon.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Motivation

Second, the concept code *intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation* was guided by research on the motivations of faculty members to do CE work. The 68 faculty exemplars in O'Meara's (2008b) study had a wide variety of motivations, including both intrinsic motivations driven by personal goals and identity, as well as extrinsic motivations driven more by organizational culture. However, O'Meara also notes that "doctoral education within departments rarely provides future faculty with even 'glimpses,' much less 'portraits,' of what engaged scholarship looks like" and that "there are few opportunities for graduate students to learn the knowledge sets, skills, and orientation specific to engagement within their discipline" (pp. 7-8). Given this

dearth of opportunity, we believe that the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are critical to understanding the participant-researchers' interest in CE work, as well as specifically taking on a positional leadership role within a CE professional association and network.

Formal Versus Informal Learning

Third, the concept code *formal versus informal learning* was guided by a conceptual piece by O'Meara (2008a) that maps out how to prepare future faculty to do CE work using the graduate student socialization model developed by Weidman et al. (2001). In this model, there are four overlapping development stages during which socialization takes place: the anticipatory stage, the formal stage, the informal stage, and the personal stage. Although this piece is primarily focused on how graduate students can be socialized into CE faculty work throughout their graduate programs, O'Meara (2008a) also acknowledges that "finding and participating in professional communities related to engaged work will provide additional sources of practical and moral support" (p. 38). Therefore, we believe the concepts of formal and informal stages of development, during which learning can take place in both graduate programs and professional communities, are useful to understanding the learning experiences taking place through a positional leadership role within a CE professional association and network.

Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

Fourth, the concept code *knowledge, skills, and dispositions* was guided by two research projects on the necessary competencies for graduate students and early career practitioner-scholars to effectively integrate commitments to CE into their scholarship and practice. Doberneck et al. (2017) describe the creation and evolution of 20 CE competencies for graduate and professional students that were developed through a review of the relevant literature and then iterative cycles of participant evaluation in a graduate certificate in CE program. These competencies are

divided into eight dimensions that include (1) foundations, (2) community partnership, (3) criticality in CE, (4) CE scholarship and practice, (5) approaches and perspectives, (6) evaluation and assessment, (7) communication and scholarly skills, and (8) successful CE careers.

Additionally, Dostilio (2017) and her team of research fellows provide guidance on essential knowledge, skills/abilities, and dispositions for community engagement professionals (CEPs) through a competency model that was developed and refined through literature reviews, conference session feedback, and a survey. The six primary functional areas in the CEP competency model include (1) leading change within higher education, (2) Institutionalizing CE on a campus, (3) facilitating students’ civic learning and development, (4) administering CE programs, (5) facilitating faculty development and support, and (6) cultivating high-quality

partnerships (Dostilio, 2017). Each functional area includes multiple competencies, and critical commitments and practices run across all identified competencies. These models outline clear areas of professional competency development, including specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions, that may be taking place throughout the learning experiences afforded to those in a positional leadership role within a CE professional association and network.

Using this emergent conceptual framework, for each research sub-question, one coder was assigned to code that portion of the narratives using a concept code appropriate for that individual question, as illustrated in Table 1. This allowed us to explore each research question individually with a focus appropriate for that question. A fourth coder coded each participant’s entire narrative using the front door versus winding pathway component, since that idea arose throughout the narratives,

Table 1. *Emergent Conceptual Framework*

Research Question	Concept Codes	Corresponding Scholarship
How do the past-chairs, chair, and chair-elect of the IARSLCE GradSN describe their experiences of navigating community engagement professional development as part of this role?	Front doors versus winding pathways	Kniffin et al. (2016)
What were their motivations for entering into this role?	Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation	O’Meara (2008b)
What significant experiences have they had as a result of being in this role?	Formal versus informal learning	O’Meara (2008a)
What has been the impact of being in this role, in terms of their professional development?	Knowledge, skills, and dispositions	Doberneck et al. (2017); Dostilio (2017)

regardless of the research sub-questions. In a final round of coding, a fifth participant-researcher not involved in the first or second rounds of coding reviewed all the coding to check for any oversights or divergent processes and increase trustworthiness of the data (Tracy, 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined our experiences in a positional leadership role and how those experiences contributed to our professional development as CE practitioner-scholars. Our intent was to bring our voices and experiences to the broader discussion of professional development for graduate students and early career professionals interested in the work of CE. To better understand our common experience related to the chair role, we each responded to reflection prompts on how we individually experienced the role of chair, including our motivations for entering the role, what significant experiences we had during our respective terms, and the impact serving in the role had on our professional development as CE practitioner-scholars.

Data analysis resulted in 56 codes from a first round of open coding, followed by four concept codes used in a second round of coding. These concept codes led to further critical reflection, which resulted in the organization of the data into three central themes. Multiple code co-occurrences were noted, which demonstrates the interplay between themes. However, the three themes are unique and reflect meaning gleaned from the data and our collective contextual experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009).

The first theme, titled “Connections and Professional Development as Motivators and Results,” illustrates how our motivations and resulting professional development experiences were directly connected. Second, our multi-year experiences are categorized collectively as “Expanded Networks Through Open Doors Instead of Winding Pathways,”

which expands upon the first theme by delineating the varied ways our respective networks were enhanced and professional opportunities emerged. Finally, in “Catalysts for Professional Identity Development and Cultivation of Cultural Capital,” we discuss how the impact of our experiences influenced professional growth beyond just professional development opportunities.

Connections and Professional Development as Motivators and Results

Through our data analysis, we discovered similarities between our motivations to serve in the chair role and the results of our experiences in that role. That is, the anticipated outcomes of our leadership experience were ultimately realized through the role. Additionally, similar to O’Meara’s (2008b) findings on CE faculty motivations, the data revealed evidence of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators for chairs. Intrinsic motivators reflected our desires to engage in activity that was personally rewarding (e.g., establishing interpersonal connections with like-minded professionals); whereas, extrinsic motivators reflected external impetus and benefits (e.g., career advancement related to enhanced skill development).

One participant described an extrinsic motivation for serving as chair, “I think part of why I applied was that it seemed applying for a leadership role like this was something I was ‘supposed to do’ to advance myself as a community engagement professional.” Her reflection emphasized actions that were at least partially externally motivated and perceived to be activities expected of CE professionals. Another participant saw serving as chair “as an opportunity to apply an existing professional skill set, build a scholarly network of peers and senior scholars, and begin to establish [her]self as a future/emerging leader in the field.” This excerpt also reflects the influence of external motivators, such as establishing oneself as an emerging leader in the CE field, and is noteworthy for how it directly corresponds to the primary professional outcomes we iden-

tified. However, it also points to the combination of external and internal motivators influencing our decisions to take on the role of chair, as building a professional network can be seen as both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivator.

Our experiences in the GradSN resulted in ongoing professional development tied to expanded interpersonal connections and professional networks. Formal opportunities for professional growth included service on the IARSLCE board and participation in program and conference planning. One participant shared that serving on the board helped “make the SLCE world feel a little smaller and easier to navigate” such as being able to email personal contacts when she had questions about the conference rather than seeing it as a “big organizational front that is impenetrable.” For this participant, her experience as chair and service on the board also bolstered her professional networking in the field and enabled her to build one-on-one connections with colleagues in the association. Similarly, another participant reflected:

Serving on both the GradSN and the board provided me ample time to get to know a professional organization more deeply than I have before. I have attended several conferences, but I have not thought a lot about the structure, purpose, and people in those organizations.

Here we see the value of a new perspective gleaned from this participant’s experience. This participant’s reflection provides insight on the impact of an increased awareness of the inner workings of a professional association on her familiarity with its purpose and structure, as well as her ability to connect with people inside the association.

Participation in program and conference planning activities related to the chair role also helped us cultivate professional relationships while simultaneously building administrative and leadership knowledge and skills. One participant noted, “IARSLCE also

invites graduate students to review conference proposals and award applications. Reading the way that others present their work and accomplishments has been an invaluable form of professional development.” Participation in the conference committee and other working groups, such as the recognitions and awards committee, provided opportunities to collaborate with other CE practitioner-scholars while developing professional skills and knowledge.

Formal opportunities for professional development were supplemented with informal, interpersonal connections that emerged through our involvement with the GradSN and the association. O’Meara (2008a) notes the value of both formal and informal stages of socialization of graduate students. She suggests informal experiences, such as personal conversations, provide essential socialization opportunities for graduate students, which surfaced in our study. One participant illustrates:

Serving as the GradSN chair connected me with peers I would not otherwise know. Moreover, the role promoted ongoing communication and engagement with these peers, which cultivated stronger relationships. It’s with these colleagues that I now collaborate on research, writing projects, and ongoing communities of support.

Informal connections also led to formal opportunities as relationships were formed and resulted in further expanded networks.

In addition to board service and committee participation and planning, serving in a visible leadership role in the association provided opportunities to establish rapport with senior scholars in the field that led to additional learning experiences, such as collaborative research agendas and scholarship opportunities. One participant explains that “contacting other scholars and then meeting them in person solidifies connections that can lead to conversations about our work.” As early career CE practitioner-scholars, we

felt empowered to connect personally with senior scholars whose work informed our own, due in part to the confidence built through our experience as chair. An additional example of this theme is this very study, which emerged as a result of such connections and led to a new, collaborative line of inquiry for each of us.

Regardless of whether our motivations were intrinsic or extrinsic or if our professional learning outcomes came through formal or informal means, the alignment of our motivations with the outcomes of our experiences is noteworthy because it illustrates how serving as chair can be an effective professional development opportunity, where individual goals, existing development opportunities, and outcomes associated with those experiences are all congruent. In the case of our experiences as chair, we were able to fulfill our personal and professional connection needs while leveraging shared experiences and contexts to advance our professional growth.

Expanded Networks Through Open Doors Instead of Winding Pathways

As noted in the previous section, enhanced scholarly and professional networks were both a consistent motivation and an outcome of serving as chair that we each considered significant. This second theme explores the mechanisms by which these connections were made. Participation in the GradSN and subsequent engagement with the IARSLCE board and the annual conference enabled us to develop a robust and supportive network of fellow CE practitioner-scholars, including senior scholars. Association sponsored events, including traditional conference opportunities, as well as virtual meetings, provided spaces intentionally designed to facilitate networking among graduate students.

Kniffin et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of intentionally engaging early career CE practitioner-scholars with direct, welcoming invitations for active participation in professional and scholarly networks. The

targeted “front door” efforts we experienced exist in contrast to the haphazard “winding pathways” of professional entry that Kniffin et al. describe as a significant deterrent to some early career CE practitioner-scholars with less “human, cultural, and economic capital” (p. 92). Winding pathways may not be equitable entryways into CE and can in fact harm an individual’s professional progression if a straighter path is not ultimately forged.

While connections made indirectly can be beneficial, we found that direct invitations for graduate students to participate and engage in professional spaces were an essential determining factor in encouraging our involvement in the GradSN and in building robust professional networks. For example, the GradSN offered a structured writer development initiative (the Emerging Scholars track at the annual conference) that was co-facilitated by the chair and senior scholars in the field. One participant noted this as a significant learning experience, because she was able to present her research experience and gain feedback from senior scholars and other audience members. Integrating senior scholars strategically into spaces with emerging scholars validates graduate students’ contributions to the conference and the field.

This strategy also signals that graduate students are welcome and supported by senior scholars and the broader association, which further solidifies efforts to provide an inclusive space for graduate students. Another participant reflected that “this supportive environment [of the association] was juxtaposed to those at [her] institution where junior faculty and especially non-faculty were excluded from important decision-making processes.” Some of us further highlighted the connection to a professional community that resulted from involvement with the GradSN. In reflecting on her expectations and experiences, one participant shared,

Students and early career faculty, I suspect, often feel that their work might only be interesting to themselves only. Or that they aren’t sure if their ideas are something of value worth pursuing. I

left that session feeling that my research question was interesting, that my conceptual framework was worthy of further development and refinement, and that if I did this work, someone else would care.

The GradSN and IARSLCE more broadly provided a welcoming, inclusive space for sharing and generating ideas that validated our scholarly contributions.

Additionally, in our analysis several experiences were coded as both “front doors” and “winding pathways” demonstrating an interplay between these concepts. We found that direct invitations, or front doors, helped us overcome or circumvent initial barriers to engagement with the network. We also found that we more easily navigated the network independently once we were able to cross that initial threshold or external boundary. For example, one participant described the GradSN reception—which is an invitation only reception with senior scholars in the field—as “one of the most exciting and important experiences” of her time as chair. She continued to describe the positive impact this initial experience had on her later perceptions of the network and her continued participation in it. This positive experience helped her overcome the initial barrier to engagement with IARSLCE and led her to pursue even deeper engagement with the network.

Our study suggests direct invitations, especially from senior scholars, for graduate students to participate in structured leadership opportunities within professional associations provide more consistent and equitable front door access and help to ensure inclusive engagement in professional spaces among graduate students. However, it is also true that for some, winding pathways may result in enriching experiences for those who persist through them.

Catalyst for Professional Identity Development and Cultivation of Cultural Capital

The experiences we each gained as chair contributed to our professional identity

development and the cultivation of cultural capital within professional associations and the broader field of CE. Professional identity reflects the attitudes, beliefs, and standards which support a particular role in a given profession (Higgs, 1993; Trede et al., 2012) and is therefore a self-conceptualized role within a given context. Our conceptualization of the chair role as an opportunity for professional development, or learning intervention (Rizzolo et al., 2016), is delineated from professional identity development defined as one’s professional self-concept inclusive of values, beliefs, and standards (Trede et al., 2012). This surfaced as an important theme in our data analysis. While professional identity development is not an intentional or explicit outcome of professional development provided through the GradSN, we nevertheless found the professional development opportunities stemming from the chair role contributed substantially to our emerging professional identities.

Similarly, our analysis revealed how emergent cultural capital influenced our conceptualization of the field more broadly and our place and function within it. Our experiences as chair enabled us to view the CE field as an overarching community of practice with its own system of valuation and practice (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The experiences related to our role provided us with formal and informal learning opportunities to develop competency in certain areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Dostilio, 2017), which enhanced our professional identities and our cultural capital as CE practitioner-scholars. Based on the literature, we present cultural capital as the sum of the cultural signals, such as formal knowledge, skills, and behaviors, signaling belonging and currency within a field with its own system of valuation and practice (Bourdieu 1973; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Levinson, 2011).

Engagement in the GradSN immersed us within cultures of professional and research organizations, fields of research and practice, and the higher education sector more broadly.

This level of immersion reflects intentional efforts of past chairs and board members. As a means of professional onboarding, volunteer board service provided opportunities to further assimilate into professional spaces while simultaneously exploring and refining our own professional identities. One participant explained how her work on the board helped “shape [her] identity and path.” She realized that “the conferences, and then the association, [were] about stewarding and advancing research, and encouraging and supporting researchers.” This experience and enhanced awareness contributed to her emerging professional identity and supported a degree of cultural capital development that is uncommon among graduate students and early career professionals. This outcome is noteworthy for the opportunity the chair role presented to become richly steeped in the culture of a research association affiliated with the interdisciplinary practice and research of the CE field.

Opportunities for collaboration with peers and senior leaders were particularly formative for each of us. By engaging in democratically developed programs where graduate students were co-contributors, we observed and experienced first-hand the espoused commitments of the field and the association in actual practice. For example, CE scholars emphasize co-developing programs with partners; likewise, members of the board and senior scholars demonstrated such commitments in their practice by regularly engaging graduate students in the behind-the-scenes work of the association—leading us to better understand the culture of research associations.

Likewise, the position provided an opportunity to share our own voices in meaningful ways. One participant noted, “Exercising my voice in spaces where power differentials are traditionally present (e.g., the boardroom, especially a junior member) was an empowering experience. Not only was my voice accepted, it was encouraged.” Such engagement opportunities supported graduate student development and allowed us to

actively contribute to shaping an emerging interdisciplinary field of research and practice. One participant expressed how these supportive conditions reinforced her decision to serve. She stated that “opportunities to collaboratively work on research and conceptual projects, as well as publish and present on those projects, [were] directly tied to my decision to become more involved in IARSLCE and the GradSN.”

Additionally, serving in this leadership role and engaging with senior scholars on the board provided even greater opportunities for individual development and increased capital within the professional association. One participant shared the impact of these connections:

My network of colleagues on the board expanded and when it was time for me to roll-off as a graduate student, I was re-elected to the board as a general member. Shortly thereafter, I was encouraged to stand for chair. That was a not-to-be missed service opportunity! I don’t know if any of that would have happened if I hadn’t stepped into the GradSN service commitment.

This excerpt also illustrates the potential for professional spaces such as the GradSN to provide professional identity development opportunities while also creating a leadership pipeline.

Another element of professional identity development common among us is our continued commitment to the future of the field and developing the next generation of CE practitioner-scholars. One participant noted that our work “was about stewarding and advancing research, and encouraging and supporting researchers.” We view ourselves as products of efforts to advance the field through an intentional scholar-leader development pipeline, and each participant expressed a desire to pay it forward and support others. This commitment is particularly important given that CE work is often secondary to primary disciplinary research. For example, two of us have been affiliated with leadership studies as a primary disciplinary home, which

has its own conferences and journals. Because of our interest in CE, we have intentionally engaged in multiple professional networks to bridge our interests and research activity in both leadership studies and CE. One participant shared, “It is validating to be in a space where I can forefront my interest in SLCE, where others are excited about it, and where I can connect my work to others’ research.” Likewise, another participant shared that she “began writing retreats and hosted collaborative research projects (attracting as many as 15 collaborative researchers from across the country to work with [her] on a project at the same time),” which is an example of how she provided support for other CE practitioner-scholars through her institutional role.

In addition to a desire to support future CE practitioner-scholars, we each described critical commitments and dispositions (Dostilio, 2017) toward the field of CE. One participant explained how her daily practice illustrates a commitment that was molded through her leadership in the GradSN. She shared, “I think the most impactful aspect [of my experience] has been living the value of co- and democratically-engaged work.” Another participant echoed this sentiment and expressed how the experience led to “learning how to hold a leadership role within a collaborative network.” She compared the leadership skills required for a network whose members are disciplinarily diverse as opposed to typical academic units on campuses in which members shared common disciplinary cultures and norms. Yet another participant, recognizing the need to further integrate across units and organizations, reflected, “How can I be a boundary spanner?” Our service as chair required us to better understand strategies for leading diverse groups and across organizational and cultural boundaries.

With refined understandings of our professional identity and established cultural capital, our experiences demonstrated successful integration of graduate students into the CE field and simultaneous support of successful

transitions into early and mid-career professional positions. A participant summarized her experience with the GradSN and its lifelong impact, “The result of this early exposure and validation among senior scholars as both an emerging scholar and early career leader was a calm confidence that I’ve carried into a variety of roles beyond the GradSN.” The significance of learning and development opportunities, such as service as the chair, cannot be understated. These opportunities provide unique spaces and support for developing professional identity, while also enabling these emerging leaders to cultivate cultural capital as valued contributors among their professional networks.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Through this study we sought to examine the experiences of the chairs in navigating CE professional development. Due to our flexible approach to this inquiry and inclusive research methodology, we were able to include narratives of all seven individuals who served as chair since its creation. Including narratives from all seven participant-researchers provided us a comprehensive set of data for this research question. However, we acknowledge that continued participation of all seven individuals in analysis and writing could have strengthened the research through the inclusion of additional perspectives.

Additionally, our seven collective identities do not represent the full diversity of GradSN members or next generation CE practitioner-scholars; therefore, the findings have limitations to understanding the experiences of those outside of the chair role or future chairs with different identities. Research shows that historically marginalized students may have different experiences with key aspects of socialization (e.g., mentorship) within the cultures of professional and research organizations, fields of research and practice, and in higher education more broadly (Levin et al., 2013; Noy & Ray, 2012).

Finally, the findings represent a retrospective look at our experiences and growth,

which was many years ago for some of us. Accounts from peers, colleagues, and senior scholars may have added different insights to our individual and collective CE professional development journeys. While acknowledging the limitations of our study, we also believe this study indicates professional associations may have a valuable contribution to make in the professional development of graduate students and early career CE practitioner-scholars; and therefore, this educational context ought to be further studied.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study have implications for graduate students and early career CE practitioner-scholars, the GradSN and similar graduate student CE programs, IARSLCE and similar associations, and the fields of CE and higher education more broadly. We provide recommendations for practice and research in each of these areas based on these implications.

Graduate Students as Early Career CE Practitioner-Scholars

Our study shows that in addition to formal graduate programs and certificates, participation in professional associations benefits graduate students in developing their research and practice as CE practitioner-scholars. In order to effectively advise their students, graduate advisors should consider not only how departments and colleges can support the learning and growth of graduate students, but also how professional associations and graduate programs within those professional associations can offer similar benefits. Graduate advisors should encourage graduate students to seek out professional development opportunities outside of their university, including through professional associations. Graduate students already involved and invested in professional associations can also serve as informal peer advisors, similarly encouraging their peers to seek out professional associations as a source of positive professional growth and connections.

GradSN and Similar Graduate Student CE Programs

Our findings demonstrate that previous chairs benefited from a variety of professional development opportunities related to this role. The current GradSN leadership could use findings from this study to more explicitly promote the professional development benefits of the chair position as part of the recruitment of future chairs. This knowledge may increase interest in the role and encourage a more diverse pool of graduate students to run for elected positions, including the chair position.

Additionally, to more purposefully expand the diversity of individuals in the chair role and other elected roles, the current outreach and election policies and structures of the GradSN should be examined and revised as needed by current GradSN leadership and membership. As the previous chairs are a homogenous group, not representative of the growing diversity in the next generation of CE practitioner-scholars (Post et al., 2016), special attention should be paid to potential reasons for this homogeneity, such as the need for existing cultural capital to access this position.

Future research could also specifically address issues of access and inclusion. While our study shows that serving as chair can cultivate cultural capital, catalyze professional identity development, increase professional connections, provide new knowledge and skills development, and contribute to understanding of the CE professional world, more research is needed to understand if other elected leadership positions in the GradSN can lead to similar professional development. These additional elected positions include at-large members who hold roles such as conference planning committee chair or professional development committee chair. More so, research about the experiences of non-elected members of the GradSN could provide insight to how the network does or does not facilitate CE professional development for a larger group of people. Relatedly, research on the experiences of those graduate students who are part of IARSLCE but choose

not to participate in the GradSN would also be of interest.

IARSLCE and Similar CE Professional Associations

As an affiliate network of IARSLCE, the GradSN is impacted by the practices of the broader association. The findings suggest that connection to the larger IARSLCE network, including service on the board and formal and informal opportunities to interact with senior scholars, led to CE professional development opportunities for chairs. Continued support by IARSLCE for the GradSN can help facilitate further professional development opportunities for the chair and other early career CE practitioner-scholars in the network. Additionally, the association could also potentially help increase diversity within the GradSN and in the chair role by continuing to focus on issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity within the association and the broader CE field.

An addendum to IARSLCE's Reaffirmation Statement reads: "As an Association we are inclusive not only of a diversity of methods, but we are an Association that values and affirms a commitment to racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity, inclusion, and equity among its members" (IARSLCE, 2016, para. 13). Just as universities dedicate resources to support diversity, inclusion, and dedicated leadership pipelines for historically underrepresented populations, research associations like IARSLCE have a role to play in developing avenues for diverse practitioner-scholars entering the CE field. This commitment to not only diversity, but also inclusion and equity, is critical to both the association and the GradSN, if it is to live up to the values in the reaffirmation statement. In line with this, IARSLCE and similar CE professional associations may consider conducting internal assessments of how graduate students and early career professionals are accessing opportunities for professional development through their association, as either winding pathways or front doors. Associations may want to then share lessons learned and best practices for connecting graduate students to

professional associations, as well as creating front doors for their professional development.

Further, other CE associations with graduate student programs, such as Imagining America and the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, have an important role to play in the professional development of early career CE practitioner-scholars. The creation of a joint research agenda around the efforts of CE professional associations to support the professional development of graduate students will help strengthen these programs and further advance the field of CE. For example, what is the relationship of graduate programs within CE professional associations (e.g., IA PAGE Fellows, ESC EESW, and IARSLCE GradSN) to the development of CE practitioner-scholars? How might we examine similarities and differences across these programs? What are common core elements of developing CE practitioner-scholars through these programs? How might these programs cater to different audiences through their unique missions and goals?

The Fields of CE and Higher Education

More broadly, this study has implications for the fields of CE and higher education. Our study shows that graduate students are seeking opportunities like participation in professional associations to support their growth as CE practitioner-scholars. However, formal opportunities, such as the chair role examined in this study, are limited to a small number of people and seem to have a high barrier to entrance in terms of the need for existing cultural capital (e.g. a connection to or recommendation from a senior scholar). Both professional associations and higher education institutions should give more attention to the development of both formal and informal leadership opportunities with low barriers to entrance for early career CE practitioner-scholars. This includes carefully considering their leadership pipelines, especially potential trajectories for graduate students and early career professionals with an interest in CE. Association and institutional leaders are particularly well positioned to

advocate for these types of leadership development opportunities, including the creation of formal leadership roles designated for early career professionals that provide the space and support for capacity building and real-time impact.

Broader research agendas for the CE field also ought to include attention to the development of the next generation of CE practitioner-scholars and the role that professional associations play for both graduate students and other early career CE practitioner-scholars. Participation in professional associations should be examined as an area where competency development of early career CE practitioner-scholars can happen, in addition to the areas of work and school. This may be connected to the areas of scholarly skills and successful CE careers in Doberneck et al.'s (2017) competency model and the leading change in higher education functional area in Dostilio's (2017) competency model. Further, we note that Dostilio's competency model could also be expanded to include leading change within the field of CE and within professional associations. Likewise, widely recognized guidance on best practices, such as accreditation guidelines and the CAS Standards for Civic Engagement and Service Learning Programs, may also consider the role of professional associations in the training and development of CE practitioner-scholars.

CONCLUSION

Current literature outlines competencies for CE practitioner-scholars, as well as suggested approaches to developing those competencies through educational environments. This study highlights the importance of considering professional associations as an important environment for developing the next generation of CE practitioner-scholars. This collaborative autoethnographic research study aimed to understand the motivations, experiences, and professional impacts of seven CE practitioner-scholars who served as chair of the GradSN, an affiliate network of IARSLCE. Three themes emerged from the

data demonstrating that (a) seeking connections and individual growth were both motivations and outcomes of serving as the chair; (b) our professional networks were expanded through both front doors and winding pathways; and (c) the chair role and service on the IARSLCE board contributed to our professional identity development and the ability to cultivate cultural capital within the CE field.

The study has implications for graduate students and their advisors, the GradSN and similar CE graduate programs, IARSLCE and similar CE associations, and the fields of CE and higher education. These include recognizing limited opportunities for formal leadership roles for graduate students—especially those with historically marginalized identities—in CE professional associations and the importance of these roles in the development of CE competencies. We believe future research needs to include the perspectives of those in other elected roles in the GradSN and other graduate students in IARSLCE who are not connected to the GradSN. Additionally, we suggest a combined research agenda with other CE professional associations focused on the combined impact of graduate student programs within multiple professional associations. Finally, we recommend including professional associations as a key environment for future research on the development of CE practitioner-scholars.

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