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# Problematizing the Relationship Between Cultural, Social, and Political Capital and Graduate Student Participation in a Community Engagement Professional Association

Lori E. Kniffin, Trina L. Van Schyndel, and Elisabeth G. Fornaro

## Abstract

The Graduate Student Network (GradSN) brings together emerging scholars who have an interest in research on service-learning and community engagement (SLCE). In this reflective essay, we problematize the relationship between social, cultural, and economic capital and graduate student participation in the GradSN, specifically the GradSN chair role. To begin, we share the origins, process, and initial findings of a collaborative autoethnographic study that involved a group of seven past, present, and incoming chairs. Participation in this study led us to question what barriers exist for graduate student participation in the GradSN, resulting in this reflective essay. Second, we share the critically reflexive practice the three of us engaged in to interrogate our identities in relation to our chair role. Finally, we discuss the concept of full participation as a way to disrupt current structures in the GradSN, concluding with ideas for future inquiry and action.

*Keywords: graduate education, critical reflexivity, community engagement, service-learning, full participation*



The Graduate Student Network (GradSN) brings together emerging scholars who have an interest in research on service-learning and community engagement (SLCE). The GradSN is an affiliate organization of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) and is governed by a small elected executive committee that includes a chair-elect, chair, and immediate past-chair. Current GradSN chairs also serve on the IARSLCE board. We, the authors of this reflective essay, have served in the GradSN chair role, and subsequently on the board of IARSLCE.

In this reflective essay, we problematize the relationship between social, cultural, and economic capital and graduate student participation in the GradSN, specifically the

GradSN chair role. We do this by examining our own motivations for seeking this role, reflecting on the relationship between our identities and our experiences, and identifying patterns of power and privilege in the chair role. To shape this discussion, we begin by sharing the origins, process, and initial findings of a collaborative autoethnographic study that involved a group of seven past, present, and incoming GradSN chairs. Then, because participation in this study led us to question what barriers exist for graduate student participation in the GradSN, we share the critically reflexive practice the three of us engaged in to interrogate our identities in relation to serving in the chair role. Finally, we discuss the concept of full participation as a way to disrupt current structures in the GradSN that create barriers to participation. We conclude with ideas for future inquiry and action.

## Our Collaborative Autoethnographic Study

The question that guides this reflective essay grew out of the authors' work on a collaborative ethnographic study (Kniffin et al., 2021). In 2018, a small group of GradSN chairs (current and past) were on a call discussing the work of the GradSN as related to the IARSLCE strategic plan. On this call, this small group (including two authors of this article) decided to collaborate on an IARSLCE conference proposal related to this discussion, which touched on our experiences as chair. After positive feedback from additional past-chairs, the small group decided to invite all seven past, present, and incoming chairs to contribute to a study on the role of the GradSN chair. This Institutional Review Board–approved study examined the motivations, experiences, and professional impacts of the GradSN chair role with regard to our professional development as practitioner–scholars.

The seven chairs span different ages, professional positions, doctoral program phases, and personal life stages. Because the aim of the collaborative autoethnography was to understand motivations, experiences, and professional impact, it was important that we design a process that was inclusive of the busy graduate student, the administrator with a tough schedule, the new mom, and other identities that can often be barriers to participation in collaborative scholarship. Multiple methods of participation were offered, including emails, phone/video chat, and Google Docs, in recognition of varying life stages and life events taking place for each participant throughout the course of the study. We also found collaborative autoethnography to be a method of inquiry that met our democratic aims and research goals. This method allows groups to contribute personal written narratives through a collaborative process. We used Chang et al.'s (2016) four-stage iterative process as a foundation for our process, which then evolved to six stages: (1) developing writing prompts, (2) a first round of self-writing, (3) sharing and probing, (4) a second round of self-writing, (5) analysis, and (6) final writing. This allowed all to participate in self-writing and enabled a smaller group to continue to participate in additional probing, meaning-making, and final writing.

Initial findings presented at the IARSLCE annual conference (see Kniffin et al., 2018)

showed that the chairs were motivated both extrinsically (e.g., prior positive experiences with IARSLCE) and intrinsically (e.g., desire for professional growth). Additionally, their experiences were facilitated through opportunities both formal (e.g., organized conference events) and informal (e.g., personal and professional relationships). The professional impacts included finding front doors (e.g., direct personal invitations) and winding pathways (e.g., making connections/networking) into the work.

Although the initial findings of the collaborative autoethnography yielded interesting results related to the motivations, experiences, and professional impacts of our roles as GradSN chair, the collective meaning-making process compelled us to examine something beyond the scope of the study. At the time of the initial findings, the immediate past-chair, chair, and incoming chair (the authors of this reflective essay) felt the need to examine the patterns of privilege that were evident in our stories to further unpack our experiences and to critically think about how our existing capital impacted our experiences in the GradSN. This led to the reflective question guiding the remainder of this essay: What is the relationship between cultural, social, and economic capital and graduate student experiences in professional associations, such as the IARSLCE GradSN? Next, we share some of our critically reflexive practice and then discuss potential implications.

## Critical Reflexivity

During the collective meaning-making process of the collaborative autoethnography, we decided it was not enough to merely look at the motivations, experiences, and professional impacts of our role as chair without understanding how we came to access those experiences and develop those motivations. Therefore, the three of us decided to explore the relationship between our identities and experiences connected to our role as chair. We began by writing individual critical reflexivity statements (Pillow, 2003) to name, explore, and question our identities, power, and privilege. Reflecting on these statements together, we found that various forms of prior capital were evident in our pathways to becoming GradSN chair. As a way to unpack the relationship between culture and power, Bourdieu (1986/2011) spoke to the role of capital—a type of currency or credit—that can be applied in various fields

(e.g., educational, political) or exchanged (e.g., cultural capital to economic capital; Levinson, 2011). Bourdieu described three types of capital:

*economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights . . . *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications, and . . . *social capital*, made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (p. 82)

Although everyone possesses different forms of capital, certain forms are valued by those in power, leaving the capital of targeted identities (i.e., those who are controlled, disenfranchised, and marginalized) unacknowledged or devalued (Yosso, 2005).

We believe the cultural capital we gained through the chair position grew exponentially from existing capital. Although our individual agency was important to our choice to take on and invest our time in the role of chair, we also recognize that some aspects of our identities allowed us to ride an exponential curve of privilege in ways others may not be able to. The role of privilege in our stories becomes more problematic when we look at the largely homogeneous composition of the past, present, and incoming GradSN chairs. All seven of us who participated in the collaborative autoethnographic study are White females who reside in the United States, speak English, and are pursuing or have obtained a terminal degree in education. Although we recognize that we bring diverse perspectives from our geographic regions, disciplinary training, and life experiences, we acknowledge that we are not fully representative of emerging community engagement practitioners and scholars—something we unpack in more detail in our autoethnographic study (see Kniffin et al., 2021). The composition of the GradSN membership is more diverse than those who have led it, but it is still heavily White, female, and U.S.-based. Our identities (those of the authors of this essay) represent primarily majority identities and do not represent the full spectrum

of emerging SLCE practitioner-scholars' identities. Thus, we recognize that while we are experiencing the benefits of both privileged identities and prior capital, we are also participating in a system that reinforces patterns of privilege and power that contribute to underrepresentation of diverse voices in the field, within the GradSN, and in the chair role.

An “interface” between individual and structural factors carved our paths to the GradSN chair position (Halualani et al., 2006, p. 72). Systems of power privileged singular and interacting aspects of our individual identities along the way. We consider our identities as assemblages, which are the “collections of multiplicities” that describe our social identities and positionalities at any given time (Puar, 2007, p. 211), and we understand that these assemblages can shift depending on the situation. In our case, the assemblage of each of our identities and the privileges they held over time afforded us the capital required to access the chair role. For example, we all benefited from *social capital* such as strong mentors and personal support systems at our institutions and in IARSLCE. Although being female is a minoritized identity, we each still benefited from the fact that there are many White females in the SLCE field who provide us with visual markers showing us we belong. Furthermore, we all identify as having *economic capital* either from our personal or professional financial situations. This affords us not only educational opportunities, but also the ability to travel to and attend conferences, which provided even more mentorship, connections, and opportunities for leadership. Additionally, our experiences in terminal degree programs in education have provided us with not only formal knowledge, but also *cultural capital* in the form of cultural signals (Lamont & Lareau, 1988) valued in research associations.

The capital we possess is also connected to structural factors. Although IARSLCE is an international association, its members predominantly work at U.S.-based institutions. As we are all studying at U.S.-based institutions, we often benefit from the location, language, and time zone utilized in practice. This became more apparent to us when the IARSLCE conference was held in Ireland, and we unsuccessfully attempted to recruit students studying outside the United States who expressed interest in the GradSN but ultimately found barriers to participation.



## Moving Toward Full Participation application processes.

On paper, the GradSN chair position is available to all graduate students who have an interest in SLCE, including prospective students, students in between programs, current master's and doctoral students, and recent graduates. There is no IARSLCE membership requirement or membership fee. There are no prerequisites or merit-based criteria. An individual just needs to apply and be a graduate student who is willing to convene and facilitate a group of SLCE graduate students. Yet, despite what seem at face value to be low barriers to participation, through our reflections we have surfaced that the chairs have been and continue to be a homogeneous group, one that is not reflective of Post et al.'s (2016) characterization of the next generation of student scholars as "a much more racially and ethnically diverse group" (p. 1). As we seek to achieve the democratic and social justice aims central to the SLCE field, we must address that the homogeneity of this group is likely tied to prior cultural, social, and economic capital.

Part of the challenge in addressing homogeneity may be the nature of winding pathways that characterize many community-engaged practitioner-scholars' narratives. Anderson-Nathe et al. (2016) wrote, "Seldom are these paths direct or linear. Instead, they wind and amble, charted by humans engaged in complex relationships with a complex world" (p. 170). Further, Kniffin et al. (2016) pointed to the connection between capital and winding pathways into graduate programs that focus on SLCE. They wrote:

Students without a high level of persistence, the resources to devote significant time and attention to the search for a program, and/or strong connections in the field may never find these pathways—with the consequence that the SLCE movement may lose their participation and leadership. Further, the movement may disproportionately lose the voices of students who lack the privilege of access to the human, cultural, and economic capital needed to pursue such winding pathways toward SLCE. (p. 92)

Interrogating pathways into professional organizations and networks from a lens of capital may highlight more barriers to entry than simply assessing eligibility criteria and

Given the capital and privileges that encouraged our journeys and enabled us to excel, we are curious as to how we can look beyond ourselves to invite changes in the organization to make it more welcoming and accessible to minoritized identities, including along the lines of race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or socioeconomic status. Full participation, "an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others" (Strum et al., 2011, p. 3), helps us consider how we can work with others to create change so that there are inclusive and equitable processes and structures in the GradSN. In the next section, we describe future practices that can lead toward more inclusive pathways and full participation.

## Recommendations and Future Research

Taking time to reflect individually and collaboratively is important for both scholarship and practice; therefore, our reflective process and this essay are valuable in their own right. However, stopping at reflection in this case would do little to remedy the issues we have raised. In concluding this reflective piece, our initial inclination was to name future inquiry as next steps. For example, our reflective piece is limited to the experiences of the three authors, and we believe there is value in additional inquiry into the experiences of graduate students in the GradSN (and IARSLCE more broadly) who have not sought the GradSN chair role, as well as inquiry into graduate student experiences in other similar professional associations. Naming future inquiry as a next step is a practice within our comfort zone as practitioner-scholars. But we also feel called to name future actions and ask how we might leverage our capital to make space for others in an organization we care about.

There are a few initial actionable next steps we suggest for the GradSN. The first is to seek additional funding to support those without economic capital to attend the annual IARSLCE conference. Additionally, providing virtual spaces for collaboration and professional development alongside the in-person spaces would increase accessi-

bility. Similarly, we recommend engaging SLCE graduate students who cannot attend the annual conference in the organization's mentoring program, which has traditionally revolved around the conference. Beyond the annual conference, the GradSN might consider creating alternative means of collaboration and meeting that are more inclusive of people based outside the United States, such as international chapters of the GradSN. Additionally, programming could be designed specifically for varying stages of degree programs and research experience, including those seeking master's degrees or nonterminal graduate degrees. We also suggest creating additional spaces, connected to in-person and virtual programming, for minoritized identities to connect in addition to general sessions for all graduate students.

Although we feel these action steps are important, we want to end with a caution that we alone are not the ideal actors to determine next steps. Doing so without collaboration from those who are already absent from the conversation may reinforce problematic systems already in place. Ideally, we must both share our critiques broadly and engage in dialogue with others (especially those with minoritized identities) to work toward full participation within the GradSN. Therefore, effective next steps might be more process oriented, such as (a) advocating for critical reflexivity on behalf of GradSN chairs so that we are continuously improving how the GradSN seeks to support a diverse community of community-engaged practitioner-scholars, (b) partnering with and learning from the Imagining America Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows, another SLCE graduate student group affiliated with a professional organization that has more explicitly sought to advance full participation, and (c) designing research projects that inquire about the experiences of graduate students not only at their home institution,

but also with professional associations.

## Conclusion

In this reflective essay, we describe the process by which our collaborative auto-ethnographic study led us to further critical reflection on the power and privilege that enabled us to take on the GradSN chair role. The intent of this essay is to critically reflect on how the social, economic, and cultural capital that we possessed prior to our role as GradSN chair facilitated our journeys into that position. This included examining our own motivations for seeking this role, reflecting on the relationship between our identities and our experiences, and identifying patterns of privilege in the chair role. In summary, to encourage participation and leadership from those lacking the privileges or prior capital possessed by the previous GradSN chairs, the members of the GradSN must actively take up the call of full participation across the professional association. We must actively seek representation of more diverse voices in GradSN general membership, as well as specifically in the GradSN chair role. We must also seek to address inequitable structures and processes that may be barriers to inclusion of diverse voices in these roles.

We recognize that our three perspectives are limited, and the knowledge we have generated cannot be generalized to broader audiences. Instead, we hope that sharing our process of problematizing our roles through critical reflexivity and discussion will encourage others to critically examine their identities, their roles, and the operation of power and privilege in their own area of community engagement. We hope this essay raises questions more than provides answers and encourages others to consider the role of capital when developing experiences for graduate students in SLCE professional associations and beyond.

## About the Authors

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