Community-Based Research in Graduate Education: Implementing Program Decisions Across the Disciplines

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Community-Based Research (CBR) has been recognized as a significant reform agent within graduate education. This article explores the decisions involved in implementing a CBR model into graduate education programs. It uses the doctoral program in educational leadership at the University of Hartford as an example of how CBR can be employed to support the development of leadership, collaborative, and research competencies for graduate students, particularly in the area of school practice. The article concludes by highlighting particular decision points and recommendations for graduate faculty and community members to consider for assuring equitable partnerships in CBR.

Policy makers have long bemoaned the state of graduate education in the United States, recommending approaches that might enhance program quality and relevance across the disciplines. More specifically, concerns have been raised regarding the capacity of graduate education to equip students to broadly “address societal needs” (Austin, 2010, p. 92-93). O’Meara and Jaeger (2006) argue that “when graduate education is isolated from the world, it is impoverished,” maintaining that incorporating community-based research (CBR) into graduate programming “offers opportunities for students to more effectively acquire research and teaching skills, to learn the knowledge of their discipline in ways that promote deeper understanding and greater complexity, and to make connections with public agencies and groups that enrich the quality of their education” (p. 4). Indeed, graduate education represents an important dimension for postsecondary institutions interested in becoming engaged campuses (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011). Ironically, despite the fact that university and community research partnerships are burgeoning throughout higher education, the bridging of doctoral research to community needs and stakeholders has yet to be fully realized or articulated (Ward, 2010, p. 65).

Although curricular movements to integrate service-learning and civic engagement exist at the undergraduate and graduate level, doctoral reform often fails to consider community-based learning and research (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 632). An engaged university campus strives to fulfill the civic mission of educating students to become democratic citizens and seeks to address the needs of the surrounding local, national and global communities at all levels of education. According to Weerts and Sandmann (2010), “service and outreach are typically conceived as one-way approaches to delivering knowledge and service to the public, whereas engagement