

Spring 5-17-2019

# Coming Together: Graduate Students and Community Engagement

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Coming Together: Graduate Students and Community Engagement

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### Abstract

The purpose of my research was to explore how graduate students regard and participate in community engagement opportunities at the University of San Diego (USD), specifically within the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES). Thus, my research question was: How can I explore and facilitate community engagement among SOLES graduate students? Through my work, I found that community engagement efforts are of interest to the USD graduate student population while greater efforts for access and involvement would be appreciated. By focusing on the current role of this topic among the graduate population and fostering greater awareness, I was able to improve my professional and educational practice.

*Keywords:* graduate students, community engagement, involvement

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## Coming Together: Graduate Students and Community Engagement

### **Introduction**

As I reflect on my graduate student experience at the University of San Diego (USD), I begin to think of the ways that graduate programs are preparing students for future roles and careers within higher education. Community, meaningful work, and overall personal growth are values that I hold to be important in educational settings and wonder how these are enhanced through the opportunities that the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) offers its students to become involved at USD and throughout the San Diego community. More specifically, I seek to explore the emphasis on community engagement among SOLES and its students. This action research project defines community engagement as community service or volunteer opportunities, both short-term and long-term commitments, outside of the classroom. I also define the community as the Linda Vista region, the more immediate area in which USD resides.

I was prompted to focus on this topic because of my role as an employee and student, and the limited participation I have experienced outside of the classroom. Through opportunities for community service and volunteer work, I can make an impact on the surrounding community while developing my own skills as a student and professional. As an aspiring student affairs practitioner, I hope to create opportunities to engage students outside of the classroom, while continuing their learning within a group setting. As a result, my research question was the following: How can I facilitate community engagement among the graduate student population at SOLES? In addition, in what ways are graduate students already involved and how can I encourage participation or provide awareness of these opportunities? Through collaboration with campus and community partners, I hoped to create opportunities and increase participation for

SOLES graduate students to engage with the surrounding community in meaningful and developmental ways.

### **Background**

The communities within which higher education institutions are situated have felt the influence of the academic community in different ways. Through service-learning courses, volunteer opportunities, and university partnerships, surrounding communities can interact with faculty, staff, and students in various capacities. At USD, numerous avenues for community engagement exist for the undergraduate student participation and resources are well established to assist this population with getting involved. However, what does this engagement look like for graduate students, specifically within SOLES?

To establish and maintain effective community partnerships, seven characteristics have been introduced by which to frame the work: responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnerships (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012). This outline can be used to either introduce new opportunities for engagement or to evaluate current practices to improve collaborations and continue working successfully with one another. Effective engagement is also possible through the involvement of all key players within the university setting. As described by Anderson (2005), “renewed focus on how institutions serve society urges us to recognize all constituencies within the university as having a role to play in furthering these efforts” (p. 41). When the inclusion of institutional players is maximized, full capacity can be reached in regard to community collaboration. The approach institutions take toward community engagement also affects the types of partnerships that are established. Transformational organizations focus on creating positive change within the institution and the community. A culture of team learning, collaboration, and openness to change

allows for partnerships that work toward a shared vision and accountability (Kimball & Thomas, 2012). Through these shared efforts, benefits can be derived for all members involved.

The benefits that come from community engagement, service, and volunteer work is an important aspect of the research pertaining to this topic. Overall, volunteer work is seen to be beneficial to the community and the individuals participating in such opportunities. Focusing on the individuals, many factors influence why people participate, including the following: to learn new skills, to develop the self, to prepare for a career, and to express personal values and community commitment (Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998). In addition, this engagement also affects the well-being of participants, including positive physical and mental health and overall well-being (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). By participating in these types of opportunities while pursuing a graduate degree, students can positively enhance both their experience and learning through community engagement.

Within higher education, a successful integration of community engagement has been established through the introduction of service-learning courses. With incorporated supervision and evaluation, these classes foster beneficial partnerships among participants and community members in an academic setting where both parties serve as co-educators -- a key aspect through shared efforts by faculty, students, and the community as teachers and learners (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). The benefits for students through participation in these types of courses also include developing social and critical thinking skills by applying the learning that is occurring in the classroom to real life experiences and collaboration (Yeh, 2010). These positive outcomes prepare students for their academic and professional endeavors.

The existing research expands on the importance of campus-community partnerships and the different ways to establish effective engagement opportunities. However, there seems to be a

lack of focus on the role graduate students play within this realm, as not much information is available for review. Other opportunities for participation need to be introduced and studied to allow for more involvement by a larger part of the university population to expand beyond current practices. Overall, higher education institutions are seen as a benefit to the surrounding community in which they are located, through the economic and academic opportunities they provide to their neighbors (Pasque, Mallory, Smerek, Dwyer, & Bowman, 2005). Nonetheless, improvements can be made in regard to the connections with the local community, so that positive and mutually beneficial change can continue to unfold. In particular, an intersectional approach to community engagement allows for deeper and more intentional efforts with specific communities and their unique circumstances. As Mitchell (2017) suggested, “intersectional community engagement recognizes the assets of the community and looks for opportunities to leverage those resources – individuals, communal, and structural – toward meaningful change” (p. 41). This would be possible for graduate students within SOLES as their focus on educational and leadership studies provides them with the capacity to pursue this type of work.

Community engagement is important at the graduate level because when students continue their academic career research shows there is a withdrawal from public and community service (O’Meara, 2008). More attention is focused on the specific disciplinary study of choice, both at the master’s and doctoral level (O’Meara, 2008). However, to better prepare graduates for their professional endeavors, these community engagement opportunities can provide the necessary experiences to further develop their knowledge and skills to be better equipped for the workforce. This professional preparation can be viewed through the socialization theory, in which “a person takes on characteristics, values, and attitudes, as well as knowledge and skills that contribute to a new professional self” (O’Meara, 2008, p. 29). Thus, during a graduate



education, students are developing their academic and professional roles, which can be furthered and enhanced through community engagement efforts. As noted in *Graduate Education and Community Engagement*, Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) identified:

Four overlapping stages of graduate student development: the anticipatory stage, the formal stage, the informal stage, and the personal stage. During these stages, three core elements of socialization - knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement - lead to identification with and commitment to a professional role. (p. 30)

These stages and elements help us understand the learning curve students experience as they enter their graduate programs and begin to make sense of and apply their knowledge through involvement and investment within their studies and out of classroom engagement. Through the application of these stages and core elements of socialization within this action research project, the impact of community engagement efforts within a graduate education can be better understood.

More specifically, collaboration between universities and local communities allows for beneficial and important work to be pursued. USD's designation as an Ashoka U Changemaker Campus, which recognizes the role the university plays in supporting solutions to relevant and significant problems, creates an environment where community engagement is encouraged and facilitated. According to Grindle (2013), "Changemaking is about creating new solutions to address problems in existing systems" (p. 14), thus allowing USD to be a prime setting to intentionally extend participation to graduate students and to ultimately enhance partnerships and meaningful work in service of all. USD's current strategic plan, *Envisioning 2024*, also incorporates community engagement as an effort to continue expanding throughout the coming years, through one of the listed pathways titled 'Anchor Institution'. USD's recognition as an

anchor institution is defined as a way to “intentionally strengthen and deepen our partnership network and join communities as we work to enhance USD’s role in the community. This will manifest in many ways since opportunities exist for USD to be more engaged locally; we must be a great local university confronting the urgent challenges of our community” (“Envisioning 2024 – Anchor Institution,” 2019). Through this role and identity, USD’s commitment to the community and related efforts is evident.

### **Context**

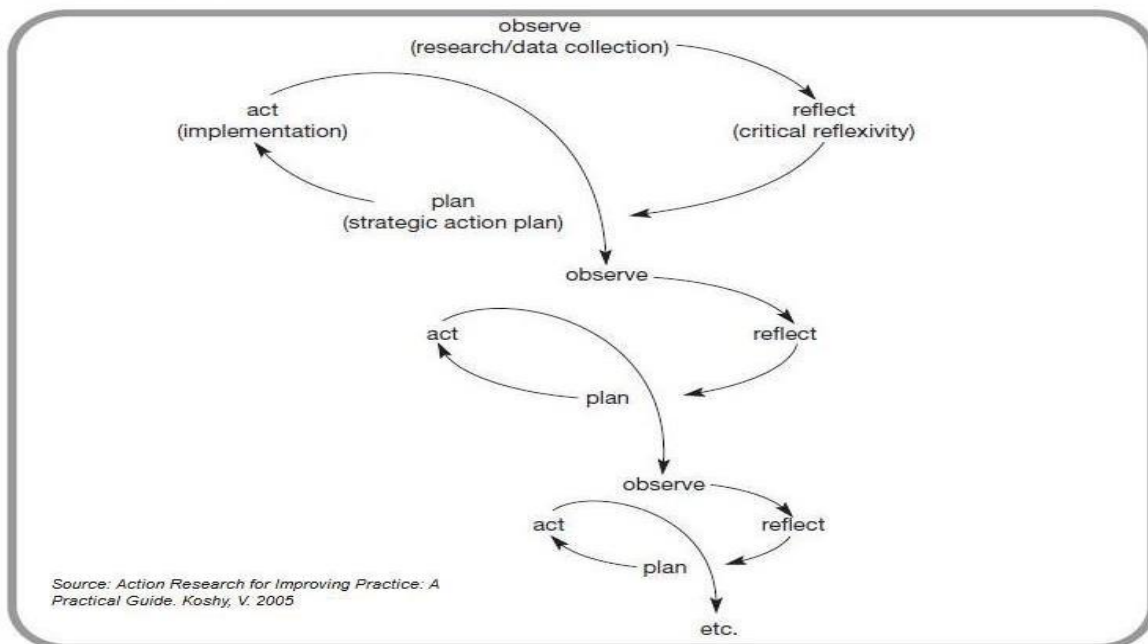
One organizational setting for my research was SOLES at USD. This graduate school is made up of four departments, each housing several graduate programs as well as numerous research institutes and centers. My research extended to all graduate programs within SOLES. My role within SOLES is as a master’s student in the Higher Education Leadership program. I am also a staff member within the student affairs division at USD. Another organizational setting included the Linda Vista region, the surrounding community in which the university resides. I was born and raised in this community and continue to be a resident. As someone who is a product of the local community, I understand the importance of giving back through time and service. I also recognize the present needs and hoped it would be beneficial for students and community members to come together to work through them.

One challenge I anticipated was the participation of students, and the continuous involvement and responses I would receive from them. Another challenge I foresaw was the lack in existing research on this topic, resulting in limited knowledge and application of previous work. Community engagement or service is applied in several ways, and I planned to continue to explore what this looked like at SOLES to inform my research and practice. I focused my work on community engagement through volunteer work. Overall, I planned to conduct surveys,

individual interviews, and observations as ways to engage with others. I also hoped to host community service opportunities, partnering with different organizations on campus to identify community partnerships and needs. Through these numerous interactions, I planned to learn with my peers and contribute to community engagement among graduate students within SOLES.

### Methodology

Zina O’Leary’s (2004) model of action research (see Figure 1) provided the framework for my project. This method is based on a cyclical process that continues to develop as new



*Figure 1: From Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide, by V. Koshy, 2005. Copyright 2005 by Publisher.*

knowledge surfaces, ultimately providing an experimental learning approach (O’Leary, 2004). The first step in this model is to observe, which includes research and data collection, to gain a better understanding of the topic. Next, there is a reflection piece to engage in critical reflexivity, which allows time to process and making meaning of the collected information. Third, the planning stage occurs, in which a strategic action plan is formulated, based on previous steps, to

design an effective and appropriate approach. Lastly, an action phase allows for the implementation of the constructed plan to collaborate toward a common understanding. This process is repeated as many times as is necessary, learning and reflecting throughout to fully engage with the topic both internally and externally, while in community with others (O'Leary, 2004).

One epistemological assumption that informed my research method was the action orientated approach to the topic, as I believe direct participation is the best way to learn and engage. As each cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting is completed, the methods, data, and interpretations are refined through the new learning to determine future cycles (O'Leary, 2004). Overall, the goal is to continuously develop the research and action through critical reflection. As community engagement is a topic that is accomplished through collaboration and partnerships, this action research method best fit my intended mission and purpose. By being in community with others, group efforts can lead to more impactful and lasting change.

More generally, an action research approach was relevant for this project because of the direct participation by the researcher as well as the ongoing collaboration and engagement with all participants. The constant reflection and modification for each cycle also favored an action research approach through which unanticipated change could be addressed. The strengths for this method included the following: researchers were in community with participants and continuous evaluation was possible. A limitation that existed with this method was that the learning or outcomes may not have been applicable to other situations as it was individualized and specific. A challenge that may have been present was the ability to generate enough data and observations to develop new cycles of action. Overall, O'Leary's (2004) method of action research best

framed the work that I completed to most appropriately explore the role graduate students hold within community engagement.

To apply O’Leary’s cycle of action research model, I conducted surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews to gather data and plan my interventions. When I began, I intended to include several cycles for different purposes. My precycle was a review of the existing data, through which I gained knowledge about previous research as well as current work that is being done on campus on my topic. After reviewing and reflecting on this information, I planned on reaching out to potential participants to provide an informational orientation for my research. With this first cycle, I collaborated with others through dialogue about my topic to discuss opinions and any potential areas for engagement. The final cycle encompassed individual interviews with students and administrators in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding about community engagement efforts within other graduate programs. During all cycles of my research, I worked through the validation of my work by constantly reviewing the data and allowing participants to do so as well to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of my claims.

Participants within the precycle consisted of campus partners, but at SOLES and throughout USD. These include the Mulvaney Center and the Changemaker Hub, centers associated with community engagement efforts. Participants within the first cycle included current SOLES students. Within the focus groups in cycle 1, 10 students participated, representing different programs. The post survey within the first cycle was completed by 8 out of the 10 focus group attendees. Lastly, the second cycle consisted of interviews with numerous administrators and students representing other graduate schools. These schools included Peace and Justice, Nursing and Business.

Earlier cycles informed later ones through the continuous observations and reflections included within the action research model. By incorporating individual and group work, I planned to analyze all available information throughout each cycle to make justified conclusions which later informed my intended actions. From the data I gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews, I looked for similarities and differences among participants and worked to understand the overall themes and outcomes that become evident throughout.

### **Needs Assessment**

Through my own experience and initial observations, I began to wonder how the graduate student population was represented among the community engagement aspect of campus life. USD's Changemaker campus identity is emphasized to the undergraduate students through various opportunities to become involved, but it seems that graduate students are left out of this important aspect of campus life. USD is also acknowledged as an anchor institution, furthering the emphasis on community engagement as an entire institution.

I was able to conduct my own research and reached out to others to gain a better understanding of this topic as it related to graduate students. I continued this work as well as became personally involved with community service opportunities to further my own participation and engagement. I was also prompted to research this specific topic through my association with the surrounding community and my desire to expand my learning beyond the classroom. Overall, my review of the literature informed me of the various studies that have been conducted in this realm, also highlighting the lack of focus on the graduate student population.

I chose to extend my research to all students within SOLES, inviting participants from each graduate program. To invite participants to join my efforts, I sent informational emails and hosted focus groups to promote my research and encourage participation, while obtaining input

and feedback from interested individuals. This helped me continue to learn about current student's opinions and knowledge about community engagement and the types of opportunities they would be interested in. My critical friends group served as collaborators to further my research through dialogue and reflection.

### **Pre-cycle**

#### **Observe**

As I embarked on my research project, I knew it would be important to become familiar with the numerous opportunities available on campus relating to community engagement. I made sure to connect with different offices, departments, and affiliated individuals to learn more about the different offerings at USD. I was able to speak to several administrators and students who were already taking part in this work and gained valuable knowledge about several initiatives and programs that are currently in place for communities around USD.

#### **Reflect**

As I learned about the community engagement opportunities on campus, I realized that most were tailored to the undergraduate student population, as is true of most on-campus resources. I also noticed that the graduate student voice and experience was missing within this context. Through my prior research, I recognized the importance of such opportunities at the graduate level and knew it would be beneficial to explore this topic among the graduate student community, particularly at SOLES.

#### **Plan**

To explore this topic within the SOLES community, I planned to speak to current students about community engagement opportunities at the graduate level. My next step was to organize focus groups with interested students where we would discuss this topic in depth. I also

planned to send out a post-focus group survey to collect demographical information from participants.

### **Act**

I prepared my focus group questions as well as the survey questions for potential participants. I also decided that I would expand my research to include all the graduate programs within SOLES to gain a more comprehensive overview of the interest in community engagement within all departments and academic programs.

### **Cycle 1**

#### **Observe**

The first cycle commenced after I reviewed the data I had gathered and analyzed during my initial research on this topic. I became familiar with the different centers on campus that focus on community engagement and the opportunities that were available through each. I was also able to speak to an administrator within the SOLES Department of Counseling & Marital and Family Therapy to learn about the current efforts available for students within specific programs. I was able to participate in a site visit and learn about the specific work students within the counseling center were partaking in related to their practical experience. This showed me that while community engagement efforts were already present at SOLES, participation was dependent on the program of study and department resources.

#### **Reflect**

Once I became aware of the on-campus efforts that were already occurring, I began to reflect on the possibility of inviting graduate students into this work. As there were several opportunities to get involved, I realized I needed to work alongside those who were interested to identify possible collaboration and partnerships.



**Plan**

During the planning stage of my first cycle, I emailed graduate students within SOLES to invite them to take part in this research project (see Appendix A for email content). My intention was to gather interested students through focus groups to speak about the topic of community engagement and their interest was in exploring related opportunities as a group. Overall, I held three different focus groups with 10 participants total; students were from the Department of Leadership Studies and the Department of Learning and Teaching within SOLES. The first focus group was the largest and most diverse, with students enrolled in the following programs of study: leadership, higher education leadership, and teaching English as a second language. The majority of students identified as international students as well as Asian or Asian American. The second group consisted of students from the higher education leadership program and leadership studies. The last focus group consisted of leadership studies students who were interested in learning more about community engagement efforts. Before each focus group session, I also had participants sign a consent form (see Appendix B for consent form content) and thoroughly explained the focus and purpose of my research.

**Act**

Within each focus group, I asked participants five different questions (see Appendix C for questions) about community engagement. Overall, the themes that arose were ones of interest and curiosity in terms of wanting to get involved with community engagement work as a SOLES community. Figure 2 also shows the different words and ideas that came up when discussing community engagement. The first question focused on how participants defined community



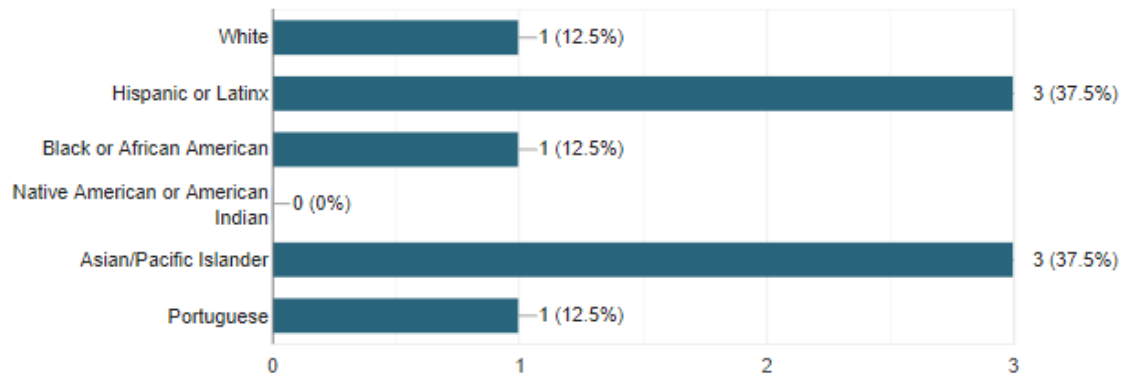
*Figure 2:* Word cloud incorporating numerous phrases reflecting on the topic of community engagement, as stated by participants within the focus groups.

engagement. This question was answered very differently among all participants and allowed me to realize that this concept can be very overarching and is viewed uniquely by all. It also led me to inform participants of the ways that I was defining the concept—as community service or volunteer opportunities, both short-term and long-term commitments, outside of the classroom. I also defined the community as the Linda Vista region, which participants also viewed in a variety of ways. In terms of current knowledge about how this topic shows up at SOLES, the consensus was that there was not much knowledge about ongoing efforts focused on community engagement. While students were aware of disbursed opportunities through the USD International Center and student organizations, it seemed that the messaging to students was not unified or readily available. One student stated, “I want to be active in my community, but how? How do I navigate current opportunities on campus?” The anticipatory stage of the socialization theory was evident within the answers given by participants as this stage encompasses preconceived ideas about the given field and the role of themselves in it (York, Tinkler, & Tinkler, 2019). This was present in the focus group because while students were interested in these opportunities and found them relatable to their graduate program, they were not fully aware of where to find them or how to become involved.

Generally, participants agreed that these types of opportunities could play a vital role in a graduate education, as one participant stated, “Community engagement can be a big part of our focus at SOLES and it transcends all programs”. Overall, participants had limited experience with this type of work but were interested in becoming involved. Participants were also able to suggest areas of interest and practices to move forward with this work. One reoccurring theme was a suggestion to incorporate a community engagement requirement or component into our courses. This would require students to complete an activity or service commitment as part of their coursework to integrate these efforts into the academic setting. As a result, a foundational framework would be established and encourage students to become aware and involved within these efforts, allowing graduate students to play a larger role as changemakers at USD.

As a follow-up to the focus group, I also asked participants to complete a short survey, to collect demographic information (see Appendix D for survey questions). As noted earlier, participants were from the Department of Leadership Studies as well as the Department of Learning and Teaching in SOLES. In terms of race or ethnicity, the majority of participants were from underrepresented backgrounds (see Figure 3). This speaks to the diversity seen within the SOLES student population at large and is also representative of the community in which USD resides. Several participants noted that their own identities and cultural backgrounds influenced their interest to become involved in serving the community. Numerous participants also identified as international students and recognized the role that community related work could play in fostering a sense of belonging and easier transition both inside and outside of the classroom. One stated: “Community engagement should serve as a road to ease transition both culturally and socially.” This reflects the importance of such opportunities in allowing students to enhance their connection and familiarity with their academic and local community. Lastly,

most participants were also in the second year of their graduate program and realized the benefits of these experiences to their academic and professional roles.



*Figure 3:* Student demographic information. Racial and ethnic groups represented in the post-focus group survey.

## Cycle 2

### Observe

After I completed my focus groups, I had participants complete the short survey and reviewed the data I had collected. I was able to see that while there was an interest in involvement, there was a sense of lack of support and structure embedded within the SOLES community. However, as I continued my own research I realized that one of SOLES's core values is community engagement, but there seemed to be a disconnect between this vision and what students were experiencing.

### Reflect

I reflected on the data from Cycle 1 and began to speak to community partners about how SOLES could move forward in terms of providing awareness and opportunities for engagement to its student population. Through these conversations, I was encouraged to expand my research to other graduate schools to learn about current efforts within other programs and disciplines to discover what best practices were already being implemented throughout USD.

**Plan**

Because of these suggestions, I realized it would be useful to learn about community engagement efforts within other graduate programs and potentially look to apply these practices to SOLES. I planned to speak with administrators and students within other graduate schools at USD to learn about current opportunities as well as gain firsthand experience about community engagement within numerous disciplines.

**Act**

I was able to interview several administrators and students, in person and through email, about the different community engagement opportunities within other graduate programs (see Appendix E for interview questions). I learned about the specific efforts within three other programs. Two of the three had a community engagement requirement for their graduate students for several reasons. One reason was the following: “In alignment with the University value of Community and Compassionate Service, our students are required to give back to the community while utilizing the skills that they learned within their program” (see Appendix F for interview responses). Thus, the university’s overall changemaker identity is also evident within this specific graduate program. Both schools that required participation in community engagement opportunities saw students participating even beyond the allotted requirements. As a result, the student feedback within these programs described these opportunities as “transformative” and “life changing.”

Within one of the schools, there were curricular experiences available for students that focused on community engagement efforts. The opportunities were either course or internship offerings. This allowed students to partake in activities that worked with their schedules, while also increasing the involvement and participation rates throughout the program. By integrating

community engagement efforts within the curriculum and making it mandatory for students to partake in at least one opportunity, these necessary experiences enhanced student's academic programs. Specific to the socialization theory, Stage 2, the formal stage, is evident among this practice as students can use their coursework and interactions with faculty and peers to continue learning and acquiring knowledge to be successful both in and out of the classroom. In addition to having these opportunities built into the curriculum, there was also space for students to pursue their own interests by introducing their own ideas in different ways.

The community engagement opportunities I learned about were also present in other ways within graduate programs. Among the three schools, there were student-led efforts that related to community work. Within organizations and practicum experiences, students were able to introduce their own ideas to apply their skills and knowledge to different interests and areas of need. I spoke to two students about their respective experiences with community engagement while in graduate school and they both commented that it provided a profound learning and collaborative experience outside of the classroom. They also linked it to their professional endeavors and realized that it enhanced their capacity both as students and professionals. Referring back to the socialization theory, the personal stage, the final stage listed within this framework, represents the process of forming a professional identity. Through engagement within community based work, students in these graduate programs have been able to accomplish this as a result of their participation and skill building. However, one student also mentioned that there are challenges with participating in this type of work at the graduate level. She stated, "Balancing all other commitments, whether personal, professional or academic, can be difficult." What can make this easier is having opportunities more readily available within specific schools to allow students to more efficiently find and connect with this work.

Throughout my conversations with administrators and students from other graduate programs a recurring theme was the importance of these learning experiences outside of the classroom. These cocurricular opportunities at the graduate level closely align with students' professional and academic pursuits while creating stronger ties with the community. One administrator stated, "Most students are proud to contribute and apply the knowledge that they have learned. Volunteer opportunities allow students to focus on an area that they are passionate about and it also affords them the opportunity to learn more about other organizations and to network." They provided the opportunity for developing skills and experiences relevant and crucial to the work students wanted to pursue after their academic journey. They also created spaces for building community and partnerships with different organizations and addressing needs that aligned with the school's mission and values. The personal stage of the socialization theory, through the element of investment, was evident through these interviews as there is a need to form a professional identity by applying the skills and knowledge acquired from participating in community engagement efforts.

The collaboration that arises from such experiences becomes a representation of the positive impact community engagement can have on all participants. As I reflected on the interviews I had conducted with students and administrators, I formulated recommendations that could work well at SOLES, as a way to incorporate my findings into an action plan.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations I faced during the course of this project. One of these limitations included the retention of participants from my first to second cycle. Due to this, the second cycle that I initially had planned, which would have included a community engagement opportunity, did not occur. The timeline of my project did not proceed as planned and as a result,

those who had initially expressed interest in participating did not continue through to the remaining cycles of my research. This might have been due to changing course schedules as well as the added demands that our second semester as graduate students introduced into our schedules.

Another limitation that I faced was the limited scope that I began my research with. I initially wanted to focus on just SOLES as my participant pool because as a current graduate student within this school it was more accessible. However, through my discussions with others I realized that it would be important to learn about what all graduate students were experiencing in regard to community engagement through their respective programs. This would allow me to gain a more comprehensive overview of these efforts as well as be able to apply best practices and resources to my research and ultimately SOLES.

In addition, the lack of research and background relating to community engagement specifically with graduate students also presented a challenge in understanding previous efforts. Making connections to the literature was difficult, but I was still able to link the overarching benefits and role of community engagement to the SOLES graduate student population.

A final limitation includes the applicability of the results and conclusions I introduced as a result of my research. Since my focus was narrow and situated within the context of USD and SOLES, the following recommendations may not apply more generally to other graduate students or schools. However, I am still able to contribute to the research pool on community engagement efforts that involve graduate students.



## **Recommendations**

### **Institutional Recommendations**

An initial recommendation that came from participants through the focus group sessions was to centralize the information being given to students relating to community engagement efforts. A possible outlet for this information could be a newsletter where input from students, faculty, and staff could be incorporated to keep the entire SOLES community up to date on numerous topics, while emphasizing service-oriented opportunities.

A second and more comprehensive recommendation would be to incorporate more community engagement opportunities within courses throughout all programs at SOLES, as well as even making it a required component of each degree. This could look differently for the specific area of study for all departments but would still play a part in each student's education. I, as well as participants in this study, see the benefit in incorporating such experiences within our academic setting. Our focus at SOLES on leadership and education pertains to community engagement driven efforts. Course related service opportunities would also allow us to apply our classroom knowledge to real world experience, bridging theory to practice, and overall reinforcing our learning. By doing so, we would also be able to showcase our commitment to USD's changemaker identity, while including graduate students in this sector of campus life. By incorporating these opportunities into courses, it would also make it more attainable and realistic for students to participate in and benefit from these experiences. Incorporating community engagement can range in scale. Courses could offer short-term opportunities for involvement or semester-long projects, depending on the area of study and course topic. However, being more intentional about emphasizing this value and mission within academic programs could allow for both students and the community to benefit from such collaborations.

### **Further Action Research Recommendations**

Further action research can be conducted on the sustainable community engagement efforts that the institutional recommendations can lead to. By implementing the above recommendations and documenting the progress or change in participation, students and administrators can continue to discover the role and impact that community engagement can have on a graduate education, while improving and enhancing these efforts.

### **Conclusion and Final Reflections**

Over the course of this research, I was able to learn more about community engagement at USD while being able to bring fellow graduate students along on the journey. Community engagement is something that needs to be practiced to realize the value in this type of work. While there is an interest from graduate students to learn about this topic and get involved, there also needs to be institutional support and advocacy for these efforts to allow and encourage participation. This becomes crucial at the graduate level because of the socialization that can occur, allowing students to be better equipped to pursue their career goals.

Through the completion of this project, my personal and professional practice has been enhanced. Personally, I realize the value in these types of opportunities outside of the classroom to apply our learning and connect with communities outside of higher education institutions. Professionally, I have also been able to advocate for these efforts and bring the graduate student perspective into these conversations. After having focused on this topic for the past year, I have also made more of an effort to become personally involved in community engagement opportunities. I hope to continue participating to form stronger connections to my community.

In conclusion, the role of higher education institutions is to “fuel knowledge creation...in order to enhance societal purposes” (York et al., 2019, p. 185). These institutions are key players in the development of not only their students but also the community within which they reside. More specifically, USD as both an anchor institution and changemaker campus allows for community engagement to become a part of the mission and vision of the university given the diversity within its local community. This identity is crucial to continuing to bridge the gap between higher education and accessibility. However, more purposeful inclusion of graduate students needs to occur within this context to allow for their academic and professional growth. Particularly, SOLES would benefit from aligning its values and resources to better incorporate community engagement opportunities as the diversity in the student population would allow for more purposeful and mutually impactful collaboration.

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## Appendix A

## Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Irma Gonzalez and I am a graduate student within the Higher Education Leadership program here at SOLES. I am in my second year of the program and currently completing my action research project in which I have chosen to focus on community engagement within the SOLES graduate student population.

I am writing to invite you all to participate in this project, where we will work together to learn about community engagement and how we can partner with our San Diego community.

I have planned several focus groups during the dates/times listed below, in order to delve into this topic and discuss potential opportunities for involvement. If interested, feel free to contact me at [igonzalez@sandiego.edu](mailto:igonzalez@sandiego.edu) to confirm your attendance or for further clarification.

**Tuesday, October 16, 2018**

**4-5pm**

**MRH 107**

**Wednesday, October 17, 2018**

**4:15-5:15pm**

**MRH 201**

**Thursday, October 18, 2018**

**5:30-6:30pm**

**MRH 203**

Looking forward to our collaboration!

Best,

Irma Gonzalez

M.A. Candidate, Higher Education Leadership

## Appendix B

## Consent Form

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board****Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

Coming Together: Graduate Students and Community Engagement

**I. Purpose of the research study**

Irma Gonzalez is a graduate student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego (USD). You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to facilitate community engagement opportunities amongst the graduate student population within the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at USD.

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study you will be asked to:

- Take part in a 60-minute focus group consisting of 4 open-ended questions about your personal experience with community engagement.
- Take part in community engagement opportunities (several will be hosted, and you may participate in as little or as many as you would like). These opportunities will conclude with a dialogue session, to provide a space for reflection.
- Complete an 8-question survey.
- Complete a 60-minute individual interview reflecting on your experience.

The focus group, participation reflections, and individual interview sessions may be recorded. Otherwise, notes will be taken during all sessions.

Your participation in this study can range from 5-15 total hours, over the span of the 2018-2019 academic year, depending on the number of engagement opportunities you decided to join.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. However, there is a potential for you to experience some negative emotions, considering that you will be asked to reflect on the meaning community engagement has for you.

If for any reason you experience negative emotions, feel free to contact the University of San Diego's Counseling Center at (619) 240-4655, or visit their office in Serra Hall 300.

**IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefits to you from participating in this research there are indirect benefits. Participation in this research project will add to the understanding and potential of community engagement within the SOLES graduate student population.

**V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

**VI. Compensation**

**You will receive no compensation for your participation in this study.**

**VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.** You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

**VIII. Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Irma Gonzalez

**Email:** igonzalez@sandiego.edu

**Phone:** 619-634-8651

2) Cheryl Getz

**Email:** cgetz@sandiego.edu

**Phone:** 619-260-4289

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

## Focus Group Questions

1. How do you define community engagement?
2. What do you know about community engagement, more specifically within the USD community and the SOLES graduate student population?
3. What role, if any, do you think community engagement should play within a graduate education?
4. Why are you interested in becoming involved?
  - a. What previous experience do you have engaging with a certain community?
5. What opportunities would you like to see available for graduate students, in regards to community engagement?

## Appendix D

## Post Focus Group Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather data regarding those who have chosen to become involved with community engagement within the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. All identifiable data such as names will be converted to pseudonyms for the final report. The information provided will be reviewed in aggregate, not on an individual basis.

- Name (open ended)
  - Student Status\* (open ended)
    - Year
    - Major/Graduate program
  - Please specify your race/ethnicity\* (select all that apply)
    - White
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - Black or African American
    - Native American or American Indian
    - Asian/Pacific Islander
    - Not Listed \_\_\_\_\_
    - Prefer not to answer
  - Age\* (fill in/blank)
  - To which gender identity do you most identify?\*
  - Male
  - Female
  - Transgender Female
  - Transgender Male
  - Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
  - Not listed \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to answer
- Do you identify as a first-generation student?\*
  - What made you interested in learning about or participating in community engagement?\*(open ended) (key words will be used for mind mapping)
  - Would you be interested in continuing your participation within community engagement during your remaining time at SOLES?\*(if applicable)

\*Required question

## Appendix E

## Individual Interview Questions for Students/Staff within other Graduate Programs

For administrators:

1. Why is community service a requirement for this graduate program?
2. What has been the feedback from students in regards to this requirement, as well as the opportunities that they have been able to participate in?
3. Do students usually only complete the minimum required hours/service?
4. What does the graduate student population look like within this specific graduate program (mostly full-time/part-time students)?

For students:

1. What emphasis does your specific program place on community engagement? Do you think it should play a role in your graduate education?
2. What type of community engagement opportunities have you participated in throughout your graduate school experience?
3. What has made it possible/accessible for you to participate in these types of opportunities? What has been challenging?

## Appendix F

## Email Exchange with Graduate School Representative

Why is community service a requirement for this graduate program?

In alignment with the University value of Community and Compassionate Service, our MBA students are required to give back to the community and focus on other non-profit organizations to volunteer a minimum of 12 hours of their time during their course of their program while utilizing the skills that they learned within their program.

What has been the feedback from students in regards to this requirement, as well as the opportunities that they have been able to participate in?

Most students are proud to contribute and apply the knowledge that they have learned. Volunteer opportunities allow students to focus on an area that they are passionate about and it also affords them the opportunity to learn more about other organizations and to network. Attached is a document which compiles direct student feedback:

"I felt like my time at JA's Finance Park facility gave the students I worked with an initial glimpse into the real world of everyday household finances, which is something I wish I had during and after my undergraduate studies. The expenses that high school kids never even consider - healthcare, insurance, childcare, education debt - are some of the most important things that adults spend money on."

"I learnt the value of a clear concise business plan and had to wrestle with the best way to frame the concept such that it presented investment potential. By putting together a draft and suggesting branding (albeit not adopted in that form) it forced the business owner to consider alternatives and actually cement the image and the name of his idea. Once it had those, the concept gained substantial momentum and traction. It was also noted that having a bilingual version of the plan would be desirable and almost necessary and by using connections at the school, I was able to help make this happen. We have had to wait on sending out the material to my Peruvian contacts as the story has since been picked up by a magazine and we would rather have a copy of that published version to accompany introduction emails for added credibility. All in all it has been a great project to work on which helped me leverage both my Latin American Environment of Business and my Global Social Entrepreneurship course skill sets and potentially provide lasting impact to an under-served civilization so important to our planet."

Do students usually only complete the minimum required hours/service?

No, in fact most students complete more than the minimum number of hours that are required. An average of the past 2 years of data has shown the average to be 22.4 hours of community service that each student completes.

What does the graduate student population at the business school look like? (mostly full-time/part-time students)?

Currently, the MBA program includes:

80 - full-time (MBAs)

160 - part time (PMBAs)

Other School of Business programs include:

MS in Supply Chain Management - 43

MS in Global Leadership - 13

MS in Executive Leadership - 35

MS in Real Estate -31

MS in Accountancy - 12

MS in Taxation - 10

MS in Finance -36

MS in Business Analytics (to launch fall 2019)