



Learning is Not the Destination

From the Associate Editor

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As I was beginning my doctoral work, one of my mentors told me that after she donated a printed copy of her dissertation to her program's library, she placed a crisp dollar bill somewhere among the pages. Years later, she thumbed through the pages of her dissertation and found that same dollar bill exactly where she left it.

That story may be apocryphal, and actually, I don't remember for sure if my mentor said that she hid the dollar bill, or if it was someone else in her program. Either way, the story makes me chuckle when I think about it, which I've done a few times lately as two doctoral students I am lucky enough to advise are approaching the finish lines of their respective dissertations. When I was at the same stage of my program, I was filled with a combination of self-doubt, panic, and exhaustion all stemming from imposter syndrome and the fear that I was finally going to be found out and unceremoniously asked to leave the program. Now I know I wasn't alone with those feelings, as a great many people in graduate programs have similar feelings, but at the time it felt so isolating.

One piece of advice that I received during my program, and one that I have passed along to my students, is that the dissertation is really a first step. To be sure, the dissertation is absolutely the culmination of one's education, and should be celebrated accordingly. But it shouldn't be the end of one's growth as a scholar. It really should be a starting point. I recently revisited some parts of my dissertation for the first time in a while, and it was almost jarring to realize how much I've grown since I graduated. Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of the work I did, but it is encouraging and affirming to see that my dissertation, which in some ways was a final goal, also served as a big first step toward more growth.

As I wrote this column earlier this year, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were still in the headlines as the latest

examples of a trend that places a bright spotlight on the systemic inequities in society. As a result, many people have been moved to take action and speak up, maybe for the first time.

For my part, as I work toward becoming a better and more effective ally, my natural tendency is to read and learn as much as possible so I can begin to better understand the issues and their context. And it looks like I'm not alone. According to a *New York Times* article published on June 5, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/books/antiracism-books-race-racism.html>), a majority of the books on the bestseller lists of both Amazon and Barnes & Noble focused on topics of racism and police violence.

In the world of community engagement, we understand that the word "scholarship" refers to much more than our research, and that taking that first step of learning something new is really only the beginning. To paraphrase Ernest Boyer (1990), learning is a "dynamic endeavor" (p. 23), and it is our responsibility to take what we're learning and determine how it can be "responsibly applied to consequential problems" (p. 21). The authors of the books I'm reading have done amazing, insightful work that has helped me start to see from a different perspective.

It's my responsibility to those authors, and the communities for whom they speak, to make sure my journey doesn't stop at learning. How do I change the way I teach and work with students such that they see justice and equity as values that should be central to their education? Through this lens, how do I then effectively challenge them to wrestle with the "big questions" and engage with their civic responsibilities? What are the steps that I need to take to authentically interrogate my own research and scholarship?

These questions don't have easy answers, and I have no doubt that I'm going to make mistakes along the way. But it's not acceptable for me to be complacent with learning new things and patting myself on the back. I need to recognize that even

if I think I'm moving in the right direction, I will always have more room to grow. And I need to use the position and privilege that I am fortunate enough to have to be an ally for antiracist work. I can't let the things I'm learning sit on the proverbial shelf in the library.

Reference

Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.