17

Arcs, Checklists, and Charts: The Trajectory of a Public Scholar?

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS I have been involved in and have led conversations about what publicly active graduate education is, how graduate students move to and through it, and what it looks like for institutions of higher education to support engagement within and alongside graduate professional and disciplinary trajectories. Increasingly, though, I have come to think that the very idea of an engaged trajectory is misleading—at least in the sense that we understand professional trajectories in our disciplines and within the academy generally: as a series of stages with various attendant rights and responsibilities, each stage leading (though not necessarily gracefully or with any certainty) to another, with (more or less) clear benchmarks, timelines, and adjudicators.

The impulse to map the engaged graduate trajectory (or its softer cousins, the "arc" and "pathway") is understandable, and has been tremendously useful in opening conversations about how to advocate for, support, and incorporate engagement within new and established graduate programs. I remember distinctly the first time I heard the phrase "the arc of the public scholar"—from David Scobey, during an Imagining America board meeting in 2005—and how uplifting and legitimating it felt to me. Yes! This crazy-making muddle of projects, programs, and plans goes somewhere! It has a shape! The idea of an arc—solid, recognizable, structural—felt at once buttressing and expansive. I wanted to climb it, stand up on top, and slide down the other side.

I took the phrase right to the group of Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) fellows assembled at the Imagining America conference that year, only the second year of the PAGE initiative. My notes from our conversation reflect the energy we found in the arc imagery. In response to the question, "What is your ideal outcome for your own career? Or, what do you want to be doing in five to ten years?" the Fellows and I generated an enthusiastic if generic list of

hopes and desires: "Inhabit a variety of roles—teacher, administrator, community worker, activist, family member; know where I live—be fully a part of my place; be called to reflect, to study outcomes; be seen as a resource; be recognized as a leader; have multiple identities validated and acknowledged; have creative and innovative freedom."

When I read this list now, I am struck by the ways that our list reflects our desires for a *way* of being and living in many ways directly in tension with our current status as transient, generally underappreciated, and entirely overcommitted graduate students. At the time, though, I did not stop to explore or make meaning of the fact that these were the kinds of answers we gave most readily and urgently, though I remember feeling a little surprised, and maybe even uncomfortable, that our answers weren't more explicitly "professional." Never mind. The list was a launch pad for my real concern—the concern that the image of an arc made tangible and that shaped both the rest of our conversation that afternoon and most if not all of my subsequent efforts to foster and lead a national network of graduate students via PAGE. If we wanted to get *there* on the arc—to that just-over-the-curve outcome, that next place along the pathway, that idealized landing to which our trajectories led—then what did we want and need? What skills? What resources? What would it look like for our graduate institutions to support our passage?

Mapping the links between where, as graduate students with a spectrum of public and scholarly commitments, we believed ourselves to be going and what we needed from our institutions in order to get there more smoothly proved to be an effective framework for expanding the PAGE network and for growing its presence both within and outside Imagining America. Our lists of what our institutions could do to support us were always rich and multiply scaled. In 2005, for example, we urged universities to:

- offer research and/or writing courses that require us to translate our dissertation project to multiple audiences, including nonacademic genres;
- create innovative postdoctoral fellowships that integrate teaching and mentoring, community programming, research, and writing;
- offer internships and/or credit for a variety of work experience, or offer courses structured to encourage these connections;
- help us learn about raising money and introduce us to funding agencies and officers;
- give us access to the university's immense publicity

machine, which can help us design and copy flyers, send out press releases, etc.

Our conference conversations were always well attended by professors and administrators who wanted to hear "what graduate students want." I made a point of ending the final PAGE activity at every conference with an even more focused conversation about what new forms of support PAGE needed from Imagining America, and these lists—which Imagining America founding director Julie Ellison affectionately called "PAGE's yearly demands"—always produced concrete improvements and expansions to the PAGE program.

That desire to map and substantiate the arc of the public scholar, which so forcefully drove my leadership of PAGE, is an impulse evident in IA's effort to specify the skills of engaged scholarship (see pp. 329–32 below), in the Tenure Team Initiative report (Ellison and Eatman 2008), in the birth of this volume itself, and in other key perspectives and position papers that argue for the place of engagement within graduate programs (e.g., Stanton and Wagner 2006). I honor and am grateful for this work and for this advocacy. But the problem with trajectory thinking is that it implies and relies on a hierarchical understanding of knowledge-building structures that does not accurately or adequately reflect the experiences of many engaged graduate students—nor the ways that knowledge is built in truly public cultural work.

Certainly, it does not explain my own experience. Before I offer an alternative way of thinking about engaged scholarly and professional development, one that seems to me at the moment both more honest and more energizing, I want to pause to explore more deeply why and how "trajectory thinking" has become increasingly uncomfortable for me, even as my own career has indeed taken a distinctly arc-like shape.

Until about a year before I started graduate school, I had no intention of pursuing a Ph.D. *Ever*. In fact, I was actively hostile to the idea. My own very intense liberal arts education—as rich, rewarding, and privileged as it most certainly was—seemed to me enough insularity for one lifetime. I chided my friends who were sending in grad school applications while working on their senior theses. Can't you think of anything better to do? Hooray for the mind—but give me *the world*. Fast forward six years. True love, multiple adventures, and a series of jobs at the margins of various educational institutions (including as after-school and community programs director at a charter high school run by a nonprofit committed to environmental education) led me to my most secure and institutionalized job yet—as the undergraduate advisor in the history department at one of the University of California campuses—significantly, *pre*–California budget crisis. Two surprising

things happened there. First, I became intensely jealous of my students. Making a point to start every advising conversation with the question, "So, why history?" I remembered how much I love school. Despite my best efforts at self-education, I began to crave directed learning, mentors, peers, syllabi, and most of all, time. Second, from an institutional position of near powerlessness, I came to appreciate the creative and generative possibilities contained in administrative work. Previously, I had been the nonprofit employee trying to squeeze resources out of whichever institutions of higher education were closest at hand. Please send volunteers, let us use your space, invite our staff to your colloquia. Now (and this is certainly a credit to the candor and leadership of the administrators with whom I worked, if even tangentially) I began to make some structural observations: It is possible to work in a stimulating intellectual context and also to *make things happen*. Big things. Things that matter deeply to people outside the University as well as within it. With the right support, positioning, and experience, this was a site, I realized, where my ideals about the democratic purposes of education could be put into practice.

Within a year, I had embarked on a graduate program in English at the University of Texas at Austin, with the intent to concentrate in rhetoric and composition. This was a disciplinary home that suited me intellectually but that also, I sensed, was one of the few places within the humanities where administration was not a dirty word. Immediately, I set about reconfiguring the standard set of assistantships through which students in my program progressed. Even before I had accepted the offer from my department, I was in touch with the director of the Humanities Institute at UT, feeling out the possibilities of getting involved in the exciting public humanities programs that center was generating. In my first week on campus, I pitched to him my idea for an adult humanities class inspired by a program I had learned about several years earlier and that remained close to my heart—the Clemente Course in the Humanities on the Lower East Side in New York City. This was a humanities seminar taught by top-notch faculty and intended to be as rigorous as any first-year course at an elite university, yet offered to an educationally alienated and economically disadvantaged group of students recruited through a web of social service agencies. I became a program coordinator for the Humanities Institute the following year, a job I held in various forms until my last year in graduate school. After three years of collaborating and coordinating several other public humanities programs, we launched, and I directed, an Austin version of the Clemente Course, called the Free Minds Project (http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/freeminds).

In my final year of graduate school, I passed on my various

programming responsibilities in order to accept a dissertation fellow-ship. The following fall, several weeks after my first baby was born, I embarked on an extremely limited job search, applying half-heartedly to a few assistant professorships in rhetoric and composition, jobs that spoke only weakly to my real aspirations, while continuing to pay the bills with a patchwork of administrative and teaching responsibilities. That spring, a colleague forwarded me a job posting that promised precisely the hybrid role I'd imagined inhabiting: public programming; curricular development in the broadest sense; undergraduate teaching as desired; working collaboratively with students, faculty, and com-munity partners. Within two months of applying, my family and I had moved across the country for me to begin the job I hold now, as associate director of a Center for Civic Engagement at a small liberal arts college in the Southeast, a position I have often described in the past year as "very, very nearly my dream job."

Certainly, this story represents a trajectory of public engagement, one that started with my observations about the possibilities contained by administrative work in higher education and augmented through the experiences I was able to find and cultivate support for while in graduate school, positions that allowed me to continue to expand my skills in designing and implementing public humanities programs. But I have told the story with a focus on the structural realities of my engagement as a graduate student—where and how I found the room to be both publicly active and a student—in order to highlight one of the key deficiencies of trajectory thinking. When we think about the "stages of professional development" for engaged scholars, and when we map these stages into a progression that leads to some ideal professional outcome, it is all too easy to come up with a picture of success that looks decidedly like the traditional academic pathway—with an engaged twist. Consider, for example, the chart of "Pathways for Public Engagement at Five Career Stages" included in Imagining America's report on tenure policy in the engaged university, *Scholarship in Public* (Ellison and Eatman 2008, 21; reprinted on p. 34 above). While the chart's framing reminds us that these stages are "recurring" (19), the chart's progression "deciding to be a public scholar" (applicable to grad students and assistant professors) to a climax of "serv[ing] as chair or dean" (available to full professors) implies that knowledge building via publicly oriented scholarship is a linear experience involving the accumulation of credentials that allow us to participate in ever more complex and legitimate forms of scholarly and public production.

Of course, this chart is offered in a report about crafting tenure and promotion policies that recognize and reward engaged scholarship. It is necessarily concerned with legitimation within traditional and

hierarchical academic structures. But what my own story illustrates are the ways that publicly engaged work upends those hierarchies. Like many of my peers, I came to graduate school with public commitments, program-building skills, and a vision for the ways that my education in graduate school might fit into a larger sense of momentum and purpose. These commitments and skills clarified and expanded while I was in school, but very little about this process was linear, at least not in the ordered, skill-gathering sense that the chart conveys. As a graduate student with public roles and commitments, I acquired the skills I needed to carry out the projects at hand as I needed them, learning from and with those around me. Commitments and projects unfolded one from the other. In the process, I found myself engaging in many of the "exercising leadership" responsibilities described on the "pathways" chart (writing grant proposals, speaking out for public scholarship) long before I had earned my Ph.D. All of this involved less a progression from one phase or stage of engagement to another than a constant shifting of the weight among the various concurrent roles I inhabited.

Increasingly, it is this imagery and terminology of "roles" that I find most useful as a framework for engaged professional develop-ment. The challenge for any engaged scholar (or citizen, activist, advocate), wherever we are in our journey through professional train-ing, is to balance the many roles we play. As many of us know well, this juggling act can feel, and be, desperate. It is often quite literally an act of survival, since no one role can easily be lopped off or put on hold, and each role demands our fullest involvement. At every PAGE conversation I have facilitated, someone has asked a version of the question, "How do I do this work and survive?" Surviving—and thriving—as an engaged scholar, is not, I have come to believe, a matter of accumulating the right skills or the right status. It is a matter of locating our multiple roles around our own central and driving commitment(s). Often these are the commitments that brought us into graduate school in the first place, and they are the commitments that lead us to maintain and initiate our connections with communities outside graduate school while we are there.

Recently, I have been exploring this way of thinking about engage-ment and professional development through a workshop exercise that asks participants to physically represent the many roles they inhabit — and the connections and disconnections between them (see p. 322). This exercise asks participants to identify, first, the central commitment or passion at the heart of their work ("the thing that you are *for*") and then to depict the various roles they play in and out of relation to that commitment, producing a graphic image of the reasons so many of us

feel overwhelmed. It gives us a visual language for the juggling act that makes up the engaged scholar's weeks, months, and years, and dramatizes the ways that our roles may create friction and outright conflict with one another. But the real impact of this exercise comes, for me, in the later steps, where participants are asked to name the projects, programs, and activities with which they fulfill or have fulfilled the roles that are most important to them—and to pay special attention to the connections between them. The exploration truly begins when participants are asked to "think about the projects and activities that stretch between two or more roles and add these to the map."

In producing my own roles map (Figure 17.1) as I developed the exercise, it was this step that brought my current public scholarship projects into focus. The projects that live wholly within *one* of my roles were not nodes of excitement for me. For example, the paper I will present based on my dissertation research at an upcoming conference in my field fits securely in the "Researcher" role, and I could slot the curriculum I wrote for a site-based orientation program for first-year students neatly in the "Teacher" role. These projects were certainly interesting, potentially fruitful, and hopefully worthwhile—but I did not see them brimming with energy and waiting to unfold. In contrast, the projects—or in some cases shades of projects—that stretched across multiple roles seemed to me vibrant, bold, even risky. They were intimately, wholly connected to my driving commitment, which I named at the center of my map as "access to transformational learning." Here, in dotted lines and triangles and highlighted words legible only to me, an undercurrent of projects and potential began to emerge. Exploring the connections between the college access program I help to direct for local high school students and my research into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vocational schools inspired my aspirations to be involved in our local workforce investment board— and now leads me to think about writing curricular and policy recommendations, not self-contained curricula or historical scholarship per se. Another example: At the intersections between my role as an advocate for civic engagement in higher education ("board member" role) and my responsibilities as a creator and evaluator of programs that bridge our campus and our city ("program administrator" role), I am contributing to a strange, highly collaborative, vision/policy document about assessing engaged academic work in the arts and humanities. The same kinds of connections, overlaps, and intersections can be glimpsed—more readily, perhaps—in the maps produced by students in Julie Ellison and Kristin Hass's Fall 2010 Rackham Public Humanities Institute course at the University of Michigan, where I piloted this roles workshop (Figure 17.2).

ROLES OF ENGAGEMENT: A WORKSHOP EXERCISE

What you need:

- a blank piece of paper, 8.5" × 11" or larger
- a pen or pencil
- crayons, highlighters, and/or markers

Instructions:

1. In the center of your blank piece of paper, write the thing that you are *for*. This is your central commitment. The exercise works best if you express this in the simplest, most general terms possible.

2. Around this central commitment, name the roles that you currently inhabit in relationship to this commitment. You can think in terms of category (Teacher, Researcher, Writer, etc.) or be more specific. Arrange these like spokes on a wheel around the central commitment you have identified.

3. Now identify the roles you don't yet inhabit with respect to this commitment, but want to; differentiate these in some way graphically (using a dotted line, a different color, etc.).

4. Add the roles that fill a significant part of your life but that do not feel connected to your central commitment. Differentiate these graphically as well.

5. Draw circles around the roles that are most important to you right now.

6. Inside these circles, add the current (and, if you'd like, past) projects, programs, activities with which you fulfill or have fulfilled these roles. Be specific. Add the activities you want or intend to undertake within these roles but have not yet. You may also want to circle the roles you have not begun to inhabit yet and indicate what activities, projects, etc., you imagine and anticipate occurring there.

7. Think about the projects and activities that stretch between two or more roles and add these to the map. Differentiate these with shape and/or color so that they stand out.

8. Indicate, in whatever way you like, the pressures that pull you away from the roles that are most important to you. Likewise, indicate the supports that encourage you in these roles. Be specific.

9. Sit back, pause, reflect, add color, and study what you have created. What surprises you about what you produced? What information has emerged for you here?

NOTE: I am grateful to the students in Julie Ellison and Kristin Hass's Fall 2010 Public Humanities Institute course, sponsored by the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan, for being such willing and reflective participants in my pilot version of this workshop. This exercise is a work in progress. I welcome comments and suggestions from those who try it, adapt it, and inevitably improve upon it.
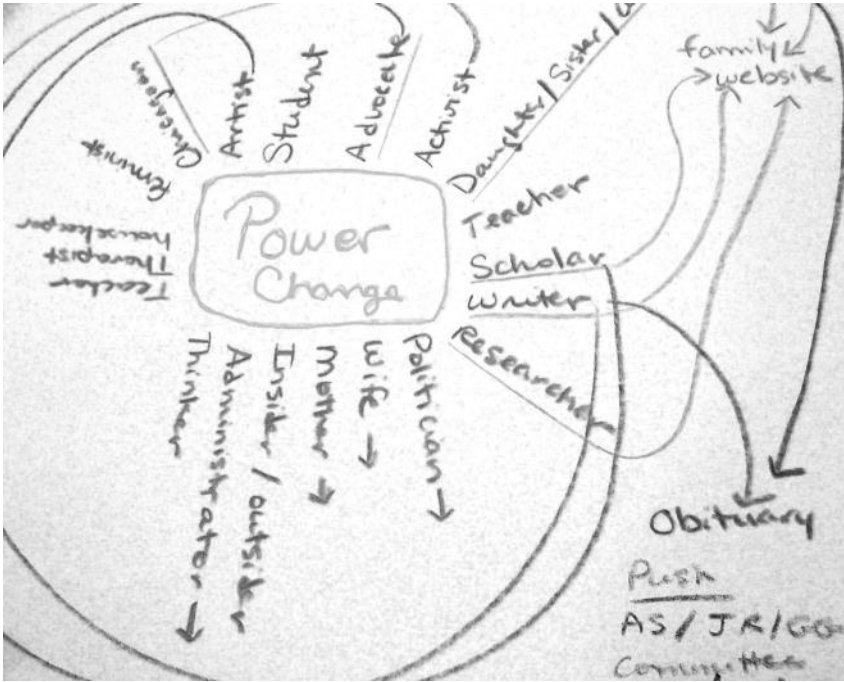
FIGURE 17.1. "Roles of engagement" roles map, by Sylvia Gale. Courtesy of the author.

It is not news that public scholarship emerges out of intersecting interests and commitments and calls upon us to embrace nontraditional (at least in an academic sense) forms, venues, and audiences. The newness that emerges in this kind of "roles thinking," however, is that the juice lies *in the intersections* themselves; the projects literally take shape in the spaces between roles. If this is so, then perhaps the highest goal of the engaged public scholar — the end state of the professional trajectory — is not the integration of roles but an ongoing and dynamic multiplicity. This will not be surprising to publicly engaged scholars who are also associate and full professors and who know that over-commitment doesn't end with tenure. But I am not talking about accepting fragmentation and exhaustion as the status quo. Nor am I disagreeing with assertions, like Timothy Stanton and Jon Wagner's, that cultivating a culture of engaged graduate education requires our institutions to make "deliberate efforts to link engagement … to pedagogical or professional ideals" (22). I am, though, suggesting that innovative public scholarship resists integration and unification.

This recognition changes the questions we ask about supporting engaged scholars at the start of their careers and it also changes the frameworks we use for envisioning the institutional change necessary

FIGURE 17.2. Roles maps by graduate students Lorelie Blackburn (top) and Antonette Adiova (bottom). Used with permission.

to encourage a culture of engagement within our schools, departments, and fields. "Trajectory thinking" causes us to ask, as I did of graduate students from around the country for many years, What do graduate students need in order to *become* publicly engaged scholars? "Roles thinking," in contrast, causes us to ask instead, What do you need to fully activate the roles and the projects that really matter to you?

Lest the significance of this shift be lost, let me illustrate its impact by recalling my graduate school orientation. On the very first day of our new careers as graduate students, within the very first hour of arriving on our new campus and, for most of us, within only days of moving to our new city, our department's then–graduate chair "welcomed" us with a speech delineating the various hurdles and barriers awaiting us in our passage to the Ph.D.—comps, quals, prospecti, assistantships, a race against the funding clock, etc. When he finished, one bold new recruit asked, shakily, "Does anyone ever do this in five years?" The answer was a resounding No. The rest of us were silent, perhaps not sure how to follow up either the diatribe or the question, both of which seemed, at least to me, to diminish our forecasted intellectual journeys. In the years since, I have often imagined an alternate kind of welcome, one that, like the roles exercise I have been experimenting with recently, might have asked us to put our reasons for being—at least for being in graduate school, if not for being at large—at the center of our narrative, inviting us to see how the trappings of disciplinary training would push, pull, propel, and possibly impede us along the way.

This is the radical vision of professional training that roles thinking allows: When we put our driving commitments at the center of our trajectories, we *de*-center the highly professionalized, hierarchical pathway that most disciplinary training reinforces. What my graduate orientation did was put the progression itself at the center of my graduate career, a move that involved assuming a great deal about where my new colleagues and I thought we were headed. Roles thinking opens this landscape up, allowing us to see that the "real work" is happening here and now in the interstices between the various ways we fulfill our central commitments—and opening up the possibility, too, that we really don't know where we are headed. What we learn in the process can be surprising, and unsettling. While discussing my roles exercise with a group recently, one student confessed that his map did not include, anywhere, the role of teacher. "This is very strange," he said. "Before this I would have said that is absolutely where I am headed, that it's one of my primary professional identities."

I love insights like that because they remind me that when we focus

closely on the work that feels most urgent to us, the institutions that otherwise might seem to be dictating our passage take a back seat, become witnesses—sometimes useful, sometimes harmful—to a larger unfolding. No doubt, though, my cavalier approach to disciplinary hurdles and professionalized goals will bother some. I recognize that this attitude reflects, for one thing, my own deep privileges, like the privilege to have had several mentors while in graduate school who affirmed my alternately developing path—including a dissertation advisor who deeply valued administrative work. And certainly, my eagerness to embrace professional training that devalues the self-replication of the academy reflects my own choice not to pursue the tenure-track professoriate as my highest goal. For me, the answer to the question of how I could best support my continued commitment to provide, explore, and think deeply about access to transformational learning led me away from a tenure-track job and towards a staff position with "faculty privileges." This choice has, of course, its own deficits and challenges. But in it I find a tremendous amount of freedom to multiply the roles that matter to me and to continue to explore and renew the spaces between the roles I inhabit, rather than subordinating the roles to the spaces my trajectory tells me I should inhabit next.

At the 2010 Imagining America National Conference in Seattle, I heard Julie Ellison reflect on the kind of "meta-analysis of complex roles grounded in public cultural work" that I am exhibiting here, a trend that makes visible, in Ellison's words, "the discontinuity of the so-called spiral, arc, or continuum." Ellison was responding to a presentation of data emergent in a study by Imagining America on "Career Aspirations and Pathways of Graduate Students and Early Career Scholars," a project that emerged out of the PAGE initiative and that focused on identifying several prototypes of publicly engaged scholars, focusing on the lives, aspirations, and decisions that led them to and through graduate school. At the end of the presentation and Ellison's response, one audience member asked bluntly, "Are you going to go farther than this? Hearing *why* my graduate students engage is not nearly as helpful to me as knowing *how* I can be of use to them."

I understood both the agitation and the tenderness embedded in his question. He wanted to know what to do *now* to support the graduate students in his program whose professional lives seemed so fragmented. It was that desire to articulate how to support engaged graduate education and to see the effects of those conversations implemented in the interests of survival that drove my own leadership of the PAGE initiative for so long. I remain as interested in proactive

restructurings, radical revisionings, and holistic experiences of graduate education as ever. But the problem, I would submit to the questioner and to myself six years ago, if I could revisit those early conversations I facilitated as director of PAGE, lies not in having multiple roles; it lies in expecting this state to dissolve and resolve into some unified, integrated, coherent whole, that steady state somewhere just over the arc's horizon. To avoid that, and to relish the engaged and artful multiplicity of our roles, we do, most definitely, need to understand the *why* that is at the center of each of our journeys.

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