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Original Research

Engaging Epistemic Tensions in Graduate Education: Promising Practices and Processes from the Tulane Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship

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Abstract

Productive tensions with traditional academic practices develop within a graduate certificate program in community engagement at Tulane University. The program offers an alternative approach to traditional graduate education practices by fostering community, epistemic justice, and care for the whole person through sustained interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary conversations and collaborations. A 2021-22 survey of current and prior program participants in the graduate certificate program documents a variety of tensions that arise when the graduate certificate program is compared to students' main experiences with graduate school at Tulane. The analysis relies on theories and concepts of epistemic injustice, decolonizing methodologies, and community engagement, which enable the interpretation of results. We find that results point to the Tulane Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship's differences in approaches compared to traditional graduate educational experiences at Tulane, offering insights into more ethical and humane possibilities for graduate education generally, as well as insights into community-engaged graduate education. These insights would be useful to

graduate program directors, graduate students, community engagement advocates inside and outside academia, and administrators interested in connecting their universities to local communities through ethically informed, graduate student-led scholarly collaborations.

Keywords: community-engaged graduate scholarship, epistemic justice, testimonial justice, graduate education, inclusion, belonging

Introduction

In the early weeks of the Tulane University spring 2023 term, a group of graduate students from various disciplines in the humanities gathered for their weekly one-hour session in the Tulane Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship (Mellon CES). The day's reading was on a Northeast university department's effort to make community engagement a part of its standard academic practices. Without hesitation, students vigorously expressed their displeasure. Their issue? They felt readings overwhelmingly favored traditional academic knowledge creation and voices. Where were the bell hooks of the world? Where was Franz Fanon? They asked.

The Mellon CES program's response to this moment was to honor those concerns and review the entire 2-year syllabus with the aid of former and current students over the 2023 summer break. While this may be viewed primarily as a pedagogical move, we offer that the situation is better understood as belonging to a set of practices and approaches that move beyond teaching. The structures, processes, and practices developed over the seven-year journey of the Mellon CES program at Tulane have the potential to inform other campuses across the U.S. on how graduate education can be transformed. In this paper, we assert that Tulane's Mellon CES program presents a powerful potential model for transforming the graduate education experience via community-engaged practices and community building in a manner that better meets the needs of students who want to be active in the world and who want to contribute their scholarship to creating a more inclusive, equitable, and just society.

Relying on theories and concepts of epistemic injustice, decolonizing methodologies, and community engagement (Fricker, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Smith, 1999; Merten and Wilson, 2012)[1], we analyze key findings from a 2022 evaluation conducted by Dr. Tait Kellogg[2] and interpret how these findings correspond to program structures, processes, and practices that we assert contributed to students' abilities to navigate epistemic injustice challenges on campus. We highlight the tensions students experience in higher education while in the program around power, knowledge creation, and belonging. We also discuss the challenges we perceive to institutionalize this approach across all academic endeavors. We follow the analysis with a discussion of key takeaways and opportunities for future inquiry and provide concluding thoughts.

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[1]Analysis of what constitutes knowledge, and the power afforded such knowledge vis-à-vis other ways of knowing that is not considered "true knowledge" is informed by Miranda Fricker's seminal conceptualization of epistemic injustice. See Fricker, 2007. Additionally, we rely on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's methodological approach in our program design, implementation, survey question design, and analysis. Also see Merten and Wilson, 2012 and Mitchell, 2008 for our understanding of community engagement and community-engaged practices in higher education.

[2] Dr. Tait Kellogg is a Tulane University PhD graduate and a former Mellon CES program fellow. Her evaluation findings can be found at https://mellon.wp.tulane.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/405/2023/07/Mellon-CES-Report-TEC.pdf

Methodology and Analytical Framework

The data sets analyzed in this paper stem from a program evaluation conducted in 2021-22 by Dr. Tait Kellogg, an alumna of the program. This evaluation was created primarily to learn from students about their graduate educational experience while participating in the Mellon CES program. This article is limited to analyzing seven key findings that directly illustrate the discussion on epistemic tensions.

Data was not tested nor compared with external sites as it was expressly collected and analyzed for internal program evaluation purposes. As such, Kellogg used a convenient sampling strategy targeting a total population pool of 115 current and prior participants who completed at least one year in the fellowship program. Participants were emailed a 60-question survey using Qualtrics XM. Survey questions were primarily closed-ended, with 55 bipolar 5-option Likert scale and five open-ended questions. A total of 33 fellows responded, giving the evaluation a 29% response rate. The formation of survey questions was informed by the original 2017 goals established during program design, with subsequent iterations and changes born out of implementation, as well as from previous interviews with focus groups of community, faculty, and student alumni, which provided draft questions to include in the final evaluation tool. The key findings discussed below reflect questions designed to help program coordinators identify whether the program was meeting its goals.

Program goals, as well as analysis of findings, were informed by the program's understanding of how epistemic injustice often occurs in the interactions of faculty and community, faculty and students, and students and community, relying heavily on established practices and theories in community engagement[3]. Using Miranda Fricker's epistemic injustice theory (2007) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing approaches (1999), we expand upon and reflect on the data provided by the evaluation in terms of productive tensions among students with their disciplines and academic life, in general. In the more than seven years of the Mellon CES program, these tensions have been manifested at various levels: conceptual, emotional, ethical, and even institutional. For example, a graduate student in their home department's core research methods course may not learn about decolonizing methodologies discussed in the Mellon CES program. Such an experience for a graduate student creates a tension that we explore in both formal and informal discussions, which the Mellon CES program has found to be very productive in helping students unpack the connections and differences between sometimes opposing methodological approaches. Conversations about these tensions within the program are enriching for the entire cohort. Combined, the approaches and frameworks we deploy center on social justice via critical

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[3] Interpretation is also aided by the concept of the 3rd university, offered by la paperson, 2017.

perspectives of systemic oppression. This allows us to align interpretation with students' testimonies[4] about their everyday experiences within and outside the program.

About the Tulane Mellon CES Program

The Mellon CES program is a two-year cohort-based fellowship that enables master's and Ph.D. level students in Tulane's arts and humanities graduate programs to earn graduate certificates in community-engaged scholarship while staying on track with their primary graduate degrees. The program is intentionally designed to break with traditional academic practices, and it works towards providing more just and epistemically rich practices, which require planning in terms of what type of experiential community building will occur via all activities.

A crucial element of this re-orientation is structured via the program's inclusive cohort model, which brings graduate students, faculty, and community members together as part of a two-year cohort that assists students as they work on developing their community engagement knowledge and practice. We begin to emphasize this approach during a day-long opening retreat, which is held prior to the start of the new academic year. The entire cohort (students, faculty, and community fellows) attends the retreat.

The retreat occurs off-campus in a community partner setting on the weekend before academic courses begin. During this retreat, all participants in the Mellon CES program are encouraged to listen and share their answers to questions about who they are, what brought them to academia, and community engagement, specifically. By naming the good, the bad, and the ugly about the existing relationship between universities and communities and listening to and telling stories about themselves, we begin to set the tone for a non-hierarchical approach to academic life and community building. The retreat utilizes well-established themes, methodologies, and activities, e.g., theater of the oppressed, poetry reading and commentary, antiracism, and wellness workshops that help the cohort bond through experiences that tap into their shared vulnerabilities and their shared humanity.

From an economic structure perspective, all three fellow types (student, faculty, and community members) receive the same annual stipend for participation. In terms of roles, faculty and community fellows are positioned as co-mentors to graduate students, who are peer mentors. Each cohort contains 12 graduate students, four faculty, and four community fellows. Throughout the Mellon CES program's two-year experience for each cohort, graduate students

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[4] We use Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial (in) justice, in which power dynamics interact with knowledge recognition, positioning the knowledge of those in power as more valuable than the knowledge of those with less or no power, such that a speaker who speaks from her lived experience may result in testimonial injustice when her knowledge of her own experience is dismissed by a listener whose position diminishes or outright rejects the speaker's way of knowing or knowledge.

take three one-credit-hour methods and theory courses facilitated by the program director and the program manager, which feature different skill-building workshops and speakers from the community and the academy. In addition to weekly student seminars, the program holds monthly large group convenings in which both 1st and 2nd-year cohorts interact and then break into small group dialogues, which we term groups of five sessions. Faculty and community fellows use these monthly groups of five sessions to engage students and learn about community engagement projects that students are working on or are interested in developing. Graduate students pursue projects in community-engaged scholarship that not only resonate with their personal and scholarly interests but also are grounded in a potential long-term collaboration with community partners. The program culminates in creating a student portfolio that explores the students' community engagement learning and practice, which may (or may not, according to the student's ability to complete) include discussion of project co-delivery with a community partner.

Throughout all aspects of the program, we attempt to provide a collaborative experience where graduate students, faculty, and community leaders work together for two years. These long-term relationships offer everyone involved crucial support needed to think deeply about the processes they are enacting, their challenges, the relationships, and collaborations they are developing, and how they can co-create knowledge with each other, regardless of discipline or educational levels. During this two-year journey, all fellows get to interact with each other as whole people in all their complexity. For example, all our sessions include a meal, and during our monthly meetings for all 40 fellows, people share stories during the meal portion of the meeting before breaking up into groups of five sessions. The meal portion of the session, in which people meet and greet and hold informal conversations, provides an experience within an academic program that eschews traditional hierarchical roles based on educational and/or professional attainment. We believe this type of practice contributes to the evaluation results we discuss below.

As analysis explores, the Mellon CES program offers compelling insights into how traditional views and practices of education and knowledge creation can be successfully challenged via community engagement, creating a path for different epistemological forms and practices to be embedded into the fabric of graduate-level education. As the evaluator, Kellogg, stated: "Tulane's Mellon Graduate Program has begun to demonstrate how interdisciplinary scholarship and research that is created with the broader community can transform both knowledge creation and the higher education experience for all involved." In the analysis below, we explore how tensions between graduate students' experiences in their primary disciplines and their experiences in the Mellon CES program become opportunities for productive exploration of how graduate education may be transformed.

Interpreting Key Findings

The Mellon CES program offers a culture shift from the one experienced by faculty and graduate students in Tulane's more traditional academic graduate offerings. Similar to other universities, the traditional disciplines at Tulane remain challenged to internalize and institutionalize the value of community voice both in curriculum and in practice, which the literature on community-engaged scholarship highlights as work that tends to be ignored or disregarded (Saltmarsh, 2012). Traditional practices in Tulane's academic units then create tension for the students in the Mellon CES program, which we explore and discuss together throughout the fellowship experience. These tensions have been experienced across our campus by service learners, interns, and faculty who have been involved in community-engaged learning for the last two decades. Such tensions typically explored in the literature focus on faculty scholarship (Krajewski-Jaime, E. R., & Edgren, 2003; Tieken, 2017) and promotion and tenure policies (Boehm and Larrivee, 2016; Telles, 2019). However, we posit that for graduate students embarking on establishing themselves as scholars, this tension is more pronounced, particularly as they enter with questions about the role power plays in who gets to be a knower and whose knowledge is considered valuable. We perceive this tension underlying the discrepancies in Figures 1 and 2 between survey respondents' attitudes towards Tulane University and the Mellon CES program.

Figures 1 and 2 show how graduate students and faculty observe the difference between experiences in the Mellon CES program and their experiences in their home departments, showing that "the vast majority of participants strongly agree (82%) or agree (15%) that graduate students are encouraged to value community voice in the Mellon CES program, as compared to less than half who strongly agree (17%) or agree (27%) that community voice is valued as Tulane Graduate Student more generally.[5]"

Grad students are encouraged to value community voice								
	Strongly Agree	●	Agree	●	Neutral	●	Disagree	●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U	17%		27%		25%		25%		6%
Grad CES	82%		17%%		1%				

FIGURE 1. COMMUNITY VOICES: STUDENT INCLUSION.

Grad students are encouraged to value community voice								
	Strongly Agree	●	Agree	●	Neutral	●	Disagree	●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U	17%		27%		25%		25%		6%
Grad CES	82%		17%%		1%				

FIGURE 2. Community voices: Faculty inclusion

In Figure 2, respondents also perceive whether the institution encourages faculty to center community voice compared to the Mellon CES program. Here, respondents perceive tensions related to the value of community voice regarding the faculty they engage. These results reflect how respondents have come to perceive the Mellon CES program differently from other university settings, which we connect to the intentional program decisions to explore the theoretical underpinnings of critical community engagement and use such exploration actively with students to co-create opportunities in which all involved are encouraged to appreciate further the testimony and wisdom of community leaders from outside of academia.

As Fricker suggests, we are at an intellectual disadvantage when we discount the testimony of those marginalized by our worldviews, and, at the same time, we do an injustice to them when we discount their value as people who know things (Fricker, 2007). As such, there are both intellectual and moral reasons for working to develop more epistemically just academic institutions in which the voices of our community partners play as vital a role in knowledge sharing and creation as those of our faculty.

We offer that by providing an intellectual setting in which the wisdom of community voices is valued, the Mellon CES program places participants in a position to experience tensions with their home disciplines, tensions that can complicate their understandings of their primary work and which may propel them to find and articulate more just and intellectually compelling approaches to their scholarship (Hoyt, 2018). Unlike traditional academic expectations on knowledge creation, we help students explore how they may bring community voices into their scholarship in ways that honor the relationships they establish while simultaneously enriching scholarly knowledge about the subject matter on which they focus.

Encouraging students and faculty to honor community voices in their scholarship is important while positioning community voices as co-creators moves towards an epistemically just environment, one in which titles and degrees don't get in the way of whose knowledge is more valued. The results shown in Figure 3, we believe, respond directly to the Mellon CES program's ability to create just such an environment, which shows that less than 25% of respondents believed that faculty, community leaders, and students are valued equally across Tulane. At the

same time, more than 80% of these respondents found that the Mellon CES program treats faculty, students, and community leaders as equals, reflecting on the experience in which titles don't get in the way of whose knowledge and input are considered worth knowing.

Faculty, graduate students and community leaders are treated as equals								
Strongly Agree	●	Agree	●	Neutral	●	Disagree	●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U	10%		12%		40%		10%		28%
Grad CES	58%		23%		3%		16		

FIGURE 3. Epistemic equality

We interpret these results from a nuanced understanding of graduate education, generally, and the Mellon CES program's goals to challenge existing assumptions, specifically. It is generally understood that graduate study in an academic discipline is not just about understanding the subject matter and the views of scholars in the field. Graduate education also involves adopting the practices and ways of knowing privileged by the discipline in a student's choice of study. Many traditional academic practices and epistemological outlooks have problematic, colonial origins, which become tension points for graduate students who wish to separate what is helpful and insightful from what is stagnant or ethically suspect, particularly when students' experiences in graduate school are typically limited to a single discipline. These challenges are nearly always combined with and exacerbated by the difficulties of navigating substantial inequities and hardships in how graduate education is currently structured (De La Cruz Santana and Stein, 2022).

This is not to say that the Mellon CES program has not lacked tensions within its programming over the seven years since its inception. Readings, session structures, and activities are continuously revised and modified according to the needs of each cohort and the nature of their community-based projects, or (as happened in the Spring 2023 term) when students find the offerings lacking in terms of its promotion of alternative, non-traditional scholars. For instance, in 2020, most students believed that training in grant writing wasn't necessary, and in the year 2021, newer students were interested in grant writing due to the nature of most of their projects. In line with that change, the Mellon CES program offered three workshops on grant writing one year, and another year, engaged Master of Fine Arts (MFA) students to run a workshop about aesthetics, racism, and transphobia in photography as a way of working towards less colonial approaches.

While the Mellon CES program has included readings by Linda Tuhiwai-Smith and la paperson, such readings began to have a deeper meaning when our graduate students put theory into practice through the workshops they advocated for and offered (Tuck and Yang, 2021). In

addition to the program's efforts to regularly pursue input from all three constituents (student, community member, faculty) via review meetings or focus groups, instances occur in which students ask for more substantive changes. For example, we recently underwent an entire 2-year curriculum review with current and prior fellows in June 2023 directly as a response to students' calls for changes. In review meetings, students offered curriculum changes that the program will incorporate in the 2023-24 academic year. It is such practices, we believe, that respondents consider when they signal (as they did in Figure 3) that they feel the Mellon CES program overwhelmingly treats all fellows as co-educators within the fellowship when compared to the rest of Tulane University.

While the program's design is based on the premise of equal access and input from participants, it is worth looking into the growth that occurs throughout the two years. For example, as briefly mentioned above, the mentorship structure departs from traditional academic processes, allowing faculty and community mentors to guide students together as partners over the course of two years in the program. Students, in turn, experience this arrangement throughout their time as part of their cohort, which we perceive as also contributing to Figure 3's results.

Another aspect of the program that promotes equal inclusion and participation among students, faculty, and community leaders is the provision of a flat annual compensation. All fellows are informed that everyone receives the same stipend amount for their annual participation, erasing the typical disparity in pay between community members, students, and faculty. This basic economic arrangement aids in removing any potential tensions that may emerge based purely on pay differences.

Because the Mellon CES program is a certificate program (and not a stand-alone graduate program) and because it is focused on ethical community engagement, which requires one to value relationships with and learn from people who are not in academia, participating faculty are not viewed as the experts in the room in the same way they are when they are in the classroom. Instead, the faculty brings a perspective from within academia, which is valuable but not more valuable than that of a community leader or often even that of a graduate student who may have been doing community-engaged work for many years.

Differences in titles and educational levels vanish, and instead, differences in backgrounds become celebrated in the groups of five sessions, as well. In practice, each student shares their reflection and progress regarding a prospective community-engaged project, and the student's group members talk through the plans and processes, offering their insights, questions, concerns, and advice. While the structural devices and practices described above don't (by themselves) eradicate the potential for any of our participating fellows to experience testimonial injustice in these settings, they do contribute to the creation of a more epistemically just relationship with faculty and community fellows, as well as fellow graduate students from other disciplines. The

structure is designed to position each student as a listener to and recipient of various viewpoints, as well as a co-contributor to other students' learning, without creating a competition for whose knowledge, opinion, or perspective ought to be more important.

Similarly, students contribute to their peers' development with community and faculty members. In this program, community members are perceived and received as co-equals and co-educators to academic scholars with respect to the experiential knowledge they contribute to students' learning. Students, in turn, benefit from experiencing a situation in which community and student voices carry the same value as faculty voices in the shared process of project development. This intentionality allows monthly gatherings to become events where a wide range of perspectives are embraced for the distinct ways in which they deepen conversations about the complexities of community engagement.

By structuring the groups of five sessions as convenings in a shared community setting to assist students in their community-engaged scholarship trajectories, we help community leaders be seen as experts and knowledge creators. Community fellows engage directly with our students by providing critical insights into their learning process. With the assistance of community fellows, students enhance their ability to conduct compelling work that addresses pressing challenges using various perspectives gained from academic and non-academic mentors. Community fellows help students participate in truth-telling, discovery, and reflection on complicated and challenging dynamics between academia and community as students explore their project development. We encourage students to call upon community fellows when they have difficult questions about their community-engaged scholarship. This way, we promote that alternative sources of truth and knowledge exist within non-academic realms.

As idealistic as the program's attempts to intentionally design welcoming and inclusive spaces and experiences may sound, it still has all the trappings of typical graduate education structures, with program directors dictating the terms of engagement, credit hours being awarded at the end of terms, and funding being contingent upon satisfactory participation, to name a few examples, which also give rise to the tensions that students experience while with us. Despite these tensions, which become part of our students' lived experiences, the stark contrast between their views of Tulane University compared to the Mellon CES program, as indicated in Table 3 results, points towards the potential for graduate education to actively create opportunities for epistemic justice to be more fully realized in graduate education.

Indeed, Figure 3 results directly correlate with Figure 4 below, in which respondents overwhelmingly agreed (97%) that the Mellon CES program plays a role in building trust among the students across the disciplines, the faculty, and community member fellows. Compared to only 31% of respondents perceiving the university as encouraging trust across communities, the

trust developed within the Mellon CES program cohort differs considerably from what occurs in traditional academic departments at Tulane.

Trust between faculty/students and community leaders is encouraged				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U 8%	23%	47%	21%	1%
Grad CES 72%	25%	3%		

FIGURE 4. Fellowship trust

The trust that rates so highly in Figure 4 results, as we understand it, stems from the mutual sharing of vulnerability in honest communication, as well as the collective freedom enjoyed when hierarchies and barriers dissipate. The groups of five sessions, for example, offer a horizontal structure that contributes towards collaborative learning and knowledge sharing that moves well beyond the typical model of the knowledge bearer pouring into empty receptacles (Freire, 1996). We posit that this horizontal structure helps foster increased trust, as structural positionings allow different voices to speak plainly and openly. All involved understand that each is there to help the other, creating a sense of shared accountability that surfaces in groups of five session conversations. Fellows come to understand, we believe, that what is to be accomplished depends in some part on what is shared in groups of five sessions, and the completion of program requirements occurs with everyone's input.

It is important to point out that individual tensions can and have occurred within the groups of five sessions. When overcome, all parties exit the other side with increased trust. Differences in approaches or perceived lack of academic rigor can sometimes become sore points that fray discussions. The Mellon CES program helps navigate these tensions through trainings on dialogues across differences and by helping all fellows to step back and trust in the process of relationship building. When this works well, students, faculty, and community leaders have shared their surprise at how a partnership can start to produce an unexpected outcome. Often, fellows must deconstruct their own internalized preconceptions of mentorship and make up new ones. For graduate students and their projects with external community partners, some tensions find relief in the groups of five sessions, and other tensions find productive criticism and encouragement toward solutions, even if these do not occur within the two-year fellowship timeframe.

Not only is building trust an invaluable outcome of the experience for all involved, but it is also especially critical for graduate students who may be embarking on their first encounter with community-engaged work. While the program typically attracts a good number of experienced students with a wealth of experiences in community engagement, for some students, participation

in our program is the first exposure to community-engaged scholarship. The trust that emerges with other fellows becomes critical for these students when they venture into the community in their relationship-building work.

Unlike traditional academic discipline expectations of academic research and writing focused on the scholar's development for the scholar's sake, the Mellon CES program moves graduate students towards participation in and with the community in their scholarly activities. Such a move may not come naturally for students pursuing studies in Portuguese or Linguistics. Still, they, too, put into practice the disposition of working with the community, which Figure 5 below highlights.

Graduate students are valued for their ability to contribute to community needs									
Strongly Agree	●	Agree	●	Neutral	●	Disagree	●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U	18%		18%		32%		30%		2%
Grad CES	74%		25%						1%

FIGURE 5. Graduate student value recognition

In a recent Imagining America report, community-engaged graduate students felt "marginally valued when their Department or program…attempted to claim their work as part of their mission" (De La Cruz Santana and Stein, 2022). Figure 5 shows that Tulane values a graduate student's ability to contribute to community needs at a paltry 36% compared to 99% in the Mellon CES program. Since its inception, the Mellon CES Program has sought to reverse traditional power dynamics and position students as valuable knowledge contributors to the communities they want to serve. For students with pre-existing relationships with community partners, failure to recognize the value already embedded in these relationships only alienates them. By affirming this value and building trust within the cohort, students feel supported and empowered to pursue interesting and valuable work that develops out of community-based relationships. Students' contributions are as valuable as any other traditionally valued academic endeavor, which helps foster an epistemically just experience that typical graduate education may fail to offer.

Through discussion and exploration of decolonial approaches to scholarship, graduate students may redirect and transform the epistemic (in)justices they encounter in the world and their disciplines. In our formal and informal conversations, we question the researcher's positionality as objective and distant from the subject of study. We invite all fellows to think critically and creatively about working through alternative, epistemically just approaches. The disparity in sentiments by respondents in Table 5 towards Tulane compared to the Mellon CES program highlights this key issue. We believe that future community-engaged scholars may repair broken

relationships within communities such that the distance between the academy and social issues becomes less pronounced and more present in graduate studies of tomorrow across all disciplines. While a good deal of graduate students in our program may be motivated by idealist expectations of an academy that will be transformed via decolonizing frameworks, it is their development as partners with and listeners to the communities with which they work that serves as the transformational process through which more hopeful possibilities can be envisioned.

The same effort put into encouraging fellows to engage with community partners underpins the interdisciplinary format of the Mellon CES program. At its most basic core, practicing interdisciplinarity means conversations are being held across different approaches and ideas. In the Mellon CES program, this takes place formally and informally via the cohort model with students from different disciplines and at different stages of their academic trajectories, as well as the faculty and community fellows who typically represent even more diverse disciplinary and professional backgrounds. We suggest that this intentional emphasis on cross-disciplinary, cross-professional relationship building informs the 99% agreement by respondents in Table 6 to being asked if they could connect with like-minded peers through the Mellon CES program, compared to only 36% through Tulane.

Graduate students are able to connect with likeminded peers outside of their department									
	Strongly Agree	●	Agree	●	Neutral	●	Disagree	●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U	18%		18%		32%		30%		2%
Grad CES	70%		29%		1%				

FIGURE 6. Graduate interdisciplinary community building

In addition to processes and structures that actively encourage cross-disciplinary conversations, from our meals before sessions to the groups-of-five session formats, we also emphasize alternative usage of diverse physical spaces, which contribute, we believe, to Figure 6 results. For example, monthly meetings occur off campus at the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design, a Tulane University building dedicated to convening designers and artists with non-profits and community groups. This space is not a traditional classroom, offering spacious open rooms and smaller cubicles. Beyond the design of the space, its importance comes from its location in the city. The Tulane Small Center is located by Oretha Castle Hayley Boulevard, which has developed into a cultural hub for New Orleans, specifically for BIPOC leaders. Through the experience of traveling to the Small Center, Mellon CES student fellows enter a space where our community leaders are the experts, and the geographical references tell different stories.

In the same spirit, the Mellon CES program has often chosen different spaces to conduct sessions. Opening retreats, for example, have occurred at Ashé Cultural Arts Center (also on the OC Hayley boulevard), at the Grow Dat Youth Farm, at the former Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice (located at a universalist church), on a running bus, driving around the city, and others. True to the mission of the program, even the food shared in the Mellon CES is primarily catered by businesses owned by people of color. Over time, these locations have contributed to a growing, shared understanding of what the graduate education experience looks and feels like in the Mellon CES program.

Finally, we felt it important to highlight one more key finding that typically receives little attention in traditional graduate education: students' sense of being whole. Anecdotally, students have shared with us that they have felt a sense of belonging and of being heard, something they state that they value about the Mellon CES program. The results in Figure 7 below support what students have shared anecdotally, as 86% of respondents agreed that they felt the program supported their wellness. This is not to say that the Mellon CES program offers robust wellness programming. Though we offer workshop sessions on mindfulness, Ubuntu philosophy, and racial healing, the program relies on the university's resources for individualized student wellness needs.

We interpret the results in Figure 7 as doing less with traditional wellness programming and more with how we engage students, community fellows, and community partners and help establish interactions among peers, faculty, and community leaders. For example, at a typical Mellon CES program session, graduate students share experiences in both joy and reflection. On many occasions, their interactions beyond the term of the program morph into deeper relationships, bonding, and friendship, not just among students but also with faculty and community members in their cohort. Tensions sometimes arise, and when they do, active listening and meaningful discussion are encouraged, which we find contributes to increased vulnerability and open sharing. When tensions are not addressed, they create the potential for disengagement on many levels.

Graduate students are supported in their body/mind wellness				
Strongly Agree ●	Agree ●	Neutral ●	Disagree ●	Strongly Disagree
Tulane U 4%	15%	25%	45%	11%
Grad CES 50%	36%	13%		1%

FIGURE 7. Graduate student wellness

The 2023 outgoing students of color and gender non-conforming students anecdotally shared with the Mellon CES program (as the 2023 spring term ended) that had it not been for the space

co-created with them, they would likely not have finished their graduate studies. They cited feeling respected as a whole person with unique insights and the sense of community, nurturing body, emotions, and mind with others across different disciplines as vital to their sense of belonging as graduate students at Tulane. For these students, the Mellon CES program, in its limited fashion, addressed testimonial injustice (as experienced by graduate students of diverse backgrounds in the program) in ways sufficient to enable the creation of a space in which epistemic justice could have the opportunity to surface for them, which in turn contributes to a feeling of belonging that supports their aspirations to pursue scholarly activities in and with the community.

Discussion

The Mellon CES program evaluation documents the ways the program offers an alternative graduate experience here at Tulane that has the potential to create a wider appreciation of the testimony and wisdom of both graduate students and voices outside of traditional academic borders. Tulane's Mellon CES program works against how the culture of academia often prevents graduate students from working with anyone outside their discipline, resulting in graduate students feeling isolated in their home departments. Within our program, the dance and sculpting MFA students build collaborative relationships with Latin Americanists conducting ethnographic research; English, philosophy, and history graduate students interact with anthropologists, sociologists, and social workers; linguists interact with writers and chemistry professors. Knowing that we recruit from a diverse pool of disciplines and interests, we intentionally attempt to create a space where a lack of knowledge about community-engaged practices, decolonizing methodologies, or other critical lenses does not hinder learning. This approach promotes process-oriented outcomes, bonding, and community building among participants.

We encourage students to grapple with society's difficult problems and align all the university's resources through coordinated, interdisciplinary conversations, collaborations, and inquiry that includes all types of knowers. Creating the opportunity for testimonial justice to flourish paves the way for the intentional creation of an epistemically just space in graduate education. For the Mellon CES program, addressing epistemic injustice is no superficial, lip-service matter; we believe that through intentional testimonial justice, we offer a transformational practice that has the potential to shape a more epistemically just world. In the words of Mellon CES program student alumna Jenn Lilly, "We use stories to connect and, later, with broader publics. Through *testimoniando* [testifying], we reveal the injustices we face, celebrate the ways we struggle against those injustices, and call others to join us in abolishing those injustices.[6]"

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[6] Quoted from our former student fellow Jenn Lilly's Mellon Portfolio, Spring 2019.

Social justice-minded students who apply to the program are concerned with the relationship between academia and the community and how it is manifested in academic narratives and methodologies. This concern results in real-world lived tensions students experience throughout their academic trajectories at Tulane. The results we highlight in this paper point to these tensions, as evidenced by the stark discrepancies in evaluation responses regarding beliefs and sentiments about the university compared to the Mellon CES program's abilities to build trust, value non-academic voices, and create a sense of belonging for students.

We suggest that the approaches described in this paper can work across the disciplines and at other universities. The obvious benefit of an interdisciplinary approach to social/epistemological justice and social change is the multi-faceted perspectives brought forth to social problems and their potential solutions and how each lived experience by different knowers can bring unique insights worth exploring (Peterson et al., 2016; Reitenauer et al., 2018). The results we interpret here cannot be detached from the lived experiences of the respondents. Their responses are directly connected to their memories of how learning occurred in their home disciplines compared to those in the Mellon CES program. As such, we propose that it is worth exploring further the standard practices and processes in the academy that tend to create isolation and disconnection from the community and repeatedly emphasize one way of knowing above others, contributing to the very epistemic injustice that graduate students seek to overcome.

A critical observation we offer for further discussion is the impact of standard academic practice on people of color, 1st generation graduate students, gender non-conforming students, and any other student that doesn't hail from the stereotypical white, middle-class milieu for which higher education is typically geared. A considerable number of the graduate students in the Mellon CES program identify as non-white, non-conforming, non-traditional students. For these students, instances of epistemic injustice feel more constant and pervasive within academic settings. While we don't have the data yet to support any concrete measurement on this observation, we can speak from our anecdotal experience that these students face a consistent barrage of injustice on Tulane's predominantly white campus. This statement is by no means an assertion of racialized differences in who experiences more or less epistemic injustice. Still, it is an observation worth sharing because it aligns with the literature on racialized practices and who tends to be on the receiving end of epistemic injustice[7].

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[7] See the following texts for in-depth explorations of racialization, power and knowledge and how knowledge and power are situated within a racial hierarchy that dictates whose knowledge is valuable and whose knowledge is not valuable, as well as who is considered capable of creating knowledge and who is not and how these relate to racialized features and power: Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dotson, 2014; Mills, 1988; Mills, 1997; Omi and Winant, 2014.

In anecdotes gathered during our weekly seminars, graduate students have offered stories of testimonial injustices they experienced regularly within their departments of study. In particular, the more seasoned students, such as those returning to graduate education after successful stints in professional capacities, have found it challenging when their opinions, ideas, and suggestions about community engagement within their disciplines have been either dismissed or ignored and, in some cases, discouraged. This is not to say that we are advocating for academic departments in graduate education to react haphazardly to every student's statement, observation, or opinion. Nor does it mean that those students have nothing new to learn. We aim to value each person for what they bring to graduate programs from their diverse experiences. In this light, we encourage others to at least begin with a more open approach and thereby take an important step towards creating a more epistemically just world.

Conclusion

The Mellon CES program intentionally offers experiences and practices that challenge dominant academic and societal norms while at the same time existing within a university as an academic program, thereby reflecting the same problematic systems and structures that have created a globally unjust and inequitable order. That is to say, the program does not exist outside of the world and does not offer the false possibility of completely dismantling existing systems and structures. Instead, it works with participants to curate experiences that help us imagine new possibilities within it. The program encourages conversations, learnings, experiences, exchanges, activities, and more that embrace the tensions between the ways the world (including traditional academia) works and the ways community-engaged scholarship requires more from academia (in terms of developing healthy relationships and taking more critical, thoughtful and, ultimately, more ethical approaches).

In aiming to propel participants to critique the traditional power dynamics of academia to become vulnerable themselves as students when engaging their community fellows and potential community partners, we encourage all to welcome being challenged by, learning from, and putting into practice decolonizing methods and critical introspection. In doing so, everyone involved experiences the possibility of a different sort of academic future. For this possible future to have the opportunity to gain traction at other institutions, we offer three key takeaways from our evaluation:

1. In dealing with those who decide what is considered knowledge within traditional academia, non-traditional, non-conforming graduate students who represent other ways of knowing require acceptance and support as they encounter epistemic tensions;
2. The relationship-based array of peers, faculty, and community fellows, along with community-based partners in co-creative relation to students, presents as the most transformative feature of our program that other schools can replicate and

3. Naming and working on the felt tensions around knowledge production and valuation opens the potential for a more just epistemic space, which in turn helps foster a sense of belonging among all involved.

At Tulane, how departments perceive community-engaged scholarship and its role in disciplinary-based spaces dates back to the early 2000s, when the university embarked on adding service learning as a critical component to the undergraduate student experience. While the wholesale transformation of graduate education is remarkably difficult, the Mellon CES program has slowly chipped away at some of the reticence with which academic departments initially met our efforts. There is still work to be done at Tulane, but we have seen some progress in departments supporting their students and even allowing community-engaged theses and dissertations. The productive tensions experienced by graduate students in the Tulane Mellon Graduate Program offer insights into approaches administrators might adopt to foster community, epistemic justice, and care for the whole person.

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