

# The Politics of Dissertation Advising: How Early Career Women Faculty Negotiate Access and Participation

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Published online: 13 September 2011  
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**Abstract** Dissertation committees are complex social arenas that underscore expertise, image, and peer relationships—all of which affect professional identity and advancement. This study presents a sampling of how early career women faculty members learn about and negotiate their participation on dissertation committees. Research questions focused on participants' concerns about the social and political aspects of participation *viz à viz* peer relationships and faculty rewards. We analyzed

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interview data using both holistic and constant comparative methods, resulting in a working model of active participation across three domains: knowledge, access, and membership. We also identified developmental trends of dissertation committee engagement across the early career.

**Key words** Faculty roles · Dissertation advising · Faculty socialization

The most obvious function of the dissertation is to mentor and prepare students to conduct research. Viewed conventionally, the dissertation process is an apprenticeship, with students as novice researchers and faculty members as expert advisors or guides. Studies of this student–faculty relationship have focused almost exclusively on the supervisory role (e.g., Barnes and Austin 2009; Pole et al. 1997; Vilkinas 2008). This characterization, however, does not account for faculty-to-faculty interaction and the complex social arena of the dissertation, particularly in terms of faculty rewards and recognition. Professional identity and advancement are at stake, and not just for the student.

Ideally, the dissertation committee works cohesively toward the development of student research capacity. Not surprisingly, however, few faculty members experience this ideal (Reybold 2008) because in reality the university is a hierarchically structured political institution subject to limited resources (Keith-Spiegel et al. 2002).

For women and minority faculty, in particular, the university can be a “chilly and alienating” climate (Aguirre 2000, p. 39). Experiences of sexism and racism in the academy are well documented (Johnson-Bailey 2001; Johnsrud 1993; Laden and Hagedorn 2000; Reybold 2009; Ropers-Huilman 2000; Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2004; West and Curtis 2006). Glass ceilings (Benjamin 1998) and cultural taxation (Padilla 1994) are only two types of reported prejudice; faculty members also note systemic discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, religious or political affiliation, and social class. Realistically, bias and discrimination extend to all aspects of faculty experiences, including the dissertation committee. This climate can create undue pressure for those who feel marginalized with respect to tenure, promotion, and other faculty rewards.

There is considerable attention in the higher education literature to faculty socialization, faculty identity development, and bias and discrimination in the academy. However, seldom does such inquiry focus on dissertation committee participation except in terms of the advising role. Even less attention is given to dissertation committee membership and its role in socializing early career faculty members to their programs and institutions, especially for women. How do these academics learn to participate as dissertation committee members, and how do they define effective participation? Further, how does participation (or non-participation) impact their sense of self as a faculty member? These questions are important indicators of work-life quality, as well as “institutional fit” and satisfaction.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe how early career women faculty members in one college learn about and negotiate participation on dissertation committees. We were especially interested in three questions about the social and political aspects of that participation viz à viz peer relationships and faculty rewards:

- How do participants experience dissertation committee roles and responsibilities?
- How do participants relate that experience to professional identity across their faculty work?
- How do participants describe the social and political structure of dissertation access and participation?

We chose to focus on one College of Education in a research university for several reasons. First, we wanted to understand faculty perceptions in relation to a shared academic culture. This focus provides a context for exploring the social dimensions of dissertation participation and provides a form of triangulation of data with respect to a common physical and social setting. Second, the College we selected has identified social justice as one of its core principles, allowing us to study the inclusion of women academics in relation to that expressed value. Third, the field of education—including colleges of education—is predominantly female. While we do not discuss the historical aspects of this fact, we recognize it as a critical issue that influences faculty perceptions and experiences. Fourth and finally, each of us is affiliated with a College of Education and Human Development. Our goal is not just to understand the phenomenon of dissertation participation, but to contribute to more effective practices related to faculty preparation, socialization, and inclusion across the academic career. We discuss the selection of the institution and participants in more detail in the Methods section.

## Literature Review

This study was framed by the literature about cognitive apprenticeships in communities of practice and their impact on professional identity development and faculty experiences of bias and discrimination.

### Dissertation Participation as Cognitive Apprenticeships

Learning to be faculty members is “embedded in the everyday activities and practices of their professional training milieu” (Reybold 2003, p. 235). This concept of becoming a faculty member through participation extends the original concept of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Learning is not individual; it is social and occurs through everyday participation in a community of practice that offers the “possibility of developing an ‘identity of participation’” (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 56).

Cognitive apprenticeships take place when doctoral faculty members pass on their epistemology and practice of faculty life through everyday interaction (Reybold 2003). Just watching and listening can be powerful learning experiences for doctoral students, who then internalize these experiences as exemplars of “being” a faculty member, which builds self-efficacy to take on the role of the master when the time comes. Of course, this apprenticeship is context-specific, with the social and cultural values of the training institution influencing the prospective faculty member’s sense of professional identity.

This premise of learning as social participation can be extended to how pre-tenured faculty learn to be competent mentors and move toward “full participation” (Wenger 1998, p. 37) as dissertation committee participants. In the academic setting, early career faculty members learn what is expected of them, at least in part, through participation in faculty activities (Reybold 2003). The outcome is heightened participation as a member of one’s communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

## Experiencing the Academy: Unequal Opportunities and Unjust Rewards

Just being a woman in the academy—especially a woman of color—adds an obstacle to appropriate peer recognition and reward. Discrimination in higher education is well documented by researchers who study the *perceptions* and *impact* of bias on academic opportunity and development of women and minority faculty (Ng 1997; Olsen et al. 1995; Rankin 2005; Reybold 2008, 2009; Ropers-Huilman 2000). We use the term “minority” here to include various and overlapping identity categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious preference, and political affiliation.

A survey of more than 8,000 pre-tenured faculty members (COACHE 2008) determined that female faculty members reported significantly less satisfaction than did male faculty members with the quality of facilities, the degree of access to teaching fellows and graduate assistants, and support services for their work in general. Women may also face discouragement from other academics who assume that their commitment, interest, or ability in the academic world is less because of their family responsibilities (Bradley et al. 2005; Mason and Goulden 2004; Samble 2008).

The academic workplace, with its requirements for achieving tenure within the first six or seven years of employment, is designed in ways that discriminate against young faculty with family care responsibilities, most notably mothers (Halpern 2008). Perna (2005) commented, “Women with children and women who are married do not realize similar benefits [as men] in terms of tenure or rank” (p. 302). This finding suggests “that sex differences in the distribution of family responsibilities persist and that women’s career outcomes are negatively impacted relative to men by these differences” (p. 302). In some cases, even women who do not have spouses, partners, or children are consigned by peers to this “mommy track” (Cummins 2005), perhaps due to the biased feminization of certain faculty roles like service (Reybold and Corda 2011; Ropers-Huilman 2000). Service expectations are qualitatively and quantitatively different for women and obviously affect research productivity and other career aspects (Ward 2003).

Of course, women are not the only marginalized group of faculty members. Numerous studies have pointed out “that Black faculty as well as their Latino, Asian, and American Indian counterparts tend to be heavily represented among faculty at the lower ranks of lecturers and assistant professors as well as reporting lower levels of success and job satisfaction” (Alex-Assensoh 2003, p. 5).

As Moody (2004) said, national studies have shown that members of the majority group within a department usually receive more mentoring—in the form of psychosocial support as well as instrumental assistance—than do minorities and women within the same department. Faculty members of color often feel isolated, and many report “being the only ‘multicultural voice’ on their faculty” (Salazar et al. 2004, p. 50).

Pre-tenure faculty members, in general, are professionally more vulnerable than tenured counterparts due to “the inordinate stresses associated with the tenure and promotion process” (Reybold 2008, p. 280). Besides tenure and promotion, early career faculty members experience other stressors: adjusting to a new institution, balancing workload, productivity, internal satisfaction, peer and student civility issues, and other transitions (Reybold 2005).

### Method of the Study

As educators whose disciplines span adult and higher education, teacher education, and education leadership, we chose to focus our inquiry on the College of Education and Human Development

at a large research university in the Mid-Atlantic region.<sup>1</sup> We focused on one college in order to account for institutional and programmatic strictures on dissertation committee participation. This College aspires to diversify its faculty in the name of social justice, and its administration and faculty claim a significant emphasis on diversity work. Faculty membership in the College is divided along the traditional hierarchical ranks of assistant (40%), associate (35%), and full (24%); the higher ranks are proportionally whiter and more male than the lower ones. The College offers various master's programs and a Ph.D. in Education. We chose to focus on the Ph.D. program because participation on dissertation committees is formally rewarded with teaching load reductions. This alternative workload augments other intangible rewards such as professional development, membership in the academic community, and contribution to emerging scholarship; and therefore, it is attractive to the faculty.

### Participant Selection and Interviews

We focused on early career women faculty as this group is experiencing firsthand the precarious nature of the pre-tenure probation period. To select individual participants, we chose a nested case sampling technique (Patton 2002). Our first-level criteria for inclusion were twofold; participants needed to be female and early career faculty members at this particular institution, with early career defined as pre-tenure. The nested case method allowed us to explore a smaller bounded case within a larger case—in this instance, an early career faculty cohort situated in the larger faculty of the College of Education and Human Development.

We identified potential participants using a faculty database and e-mailed each one to explain the study and invite involvement. All nine eligible faculty members expressed interest; seven decided to participate. The two non-participants cited concerns with fear of identification. Participants ranged in age from early 30s to mid-50s; two self identified as non-white and two as multi-ethnic. Two had been hired as tenure-track associate professors and had been previously tenured elsewhere. All had received their doctoral training at research universities.

There are two general parameters for dissertation committee participation in this College, which are that a student must invite the faculty member to participate as chair and/or methodologist and that the faculty member must be willing to serve as chair or a general member. Often, the chair will suggest the student choose certain faculty members. Dissertation committees usually are comprised of three members, but some students will choose to have additional members because of specialized expertise. There is no rule or policy for participation, even for new and early career faculty members. However, the common expectation among early career faculty members is to participate as a general member of committees as soon as possible, only accepting the role of chair after becoming more comfortable with the process. Some faculty members have chaired dissertations during their first year at the University; in such instances a senior faculty member co-chairs the committee.

### Data Collection

We developed the interview guide based on Reybold's (2003, 2005, 2008) previous work on faculty identity development and added questions based on our own experiences. In-depth interviews explored participants' understanding of their access to and experience of dissertation committee membership, socialization and preparation for committee work, academic roles associated with participation, perceptions of faculty rewards that result from committee work, and impact of participation on faculty identity. Interviews lasted about two hours each, and

<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board representing the participants' university.

participants were available for follow-up questions by e-mail. Participants chose their own pseudonyms; thus, they are able to “follow” their data through the publication process.

### Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview data using two techniques. Initially, we reviewed the transcripts according to the research questions and highlighted passages that directly or indirectly addressed those questions. This holistic method of coding, according to Saldaña (2009), is a first cycle approach to understanding emerging themes as a whole, “to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop” (p. 118). We then analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 1990), a systematic technique that employs various levels of coding to theorize the phenomenon being studied. We chose to emphasize three specific phases of coding: open, axial, and selective. Our initial coding identified emic, or participant-driven, concepts for further categorization such as “feeling out of control” and “proving yourself.” Using these open codes, we developed a master code list for each interview. We then reviewed these code sets for similarities and differences, with specific attention to certain questions that emerged through our discussions:

- What does an ideal dissertation committee “look like,” and how does it function?
- What career development issues relate to dissertation committee participation?
- How does one’s own experience as a doctoral student impact the development of “participation capacity”?

Through this type of second cycle approach to analysis (Saldaña 2009), we were able to develop categories and identity relationships among those categories.

### Quality and Ethics

Attention to quality in qualitative research requires scrutiny of the inquiry process from both technical and epistemological perspectives. For example, Patton (2002) reminded researchers to be systematic, but not at the expense of creativity and the holistic aspects of quality research. An epistemological approach emphasizes the relationship between “researchers” and “the researched,” the impact of that relationship on the construction of knowledge, and corollary perspectives. We intentionally chose methods to check for bias and to enhance reader confidence in the study. For example, two of the authors (Reybold and Brazer) each conducted half of the interviews; the purpose was to review transcripts for interviewer bias about the topic or impact on scope of findings due to interview style. Also, three of the authors (Reybold, Brazer, and Corda) independently analyzed the data, followed by various consensus-building analyses. We each represent a different disciplinary perspective.

While technical concerns about quality are important, our main concern was confidentiality. We had intended to conduct a full case study of dissertation committee participation that included student and administration perspectives. After interviewing the faculty members, we decided not to interview others, however, as that could “identify” the participants to their peers. We reminded participants that they could review and comment on their transcripts though no one chose to do so. Some participants expressed concern about confidentiality on more than one occasion during the interview and in meetings outside of the interview process. We chose to mask identifying details about participants. We recognize this constricts the scope of our findings, but our primary responsibility was to the participants.

## Results

Participants contrasted what they believe to be an ideal dissertation committee situation with their actual experiences. The dissertation process represented an important socialization agent in two ways. First, serving on dissertation committees provided the opportunity for them to take on the role of expert publically and socially. Second, through such participation early career faculty learned the local processes of faculty engagement. Interestingly, none of our participants considered their own dissertation advising experiences to be ideal; but their interviews identified three common elements of what they believe to be an effective and engaged dissertation committee, i.e., knowledge, access, and membership:

- *Knowledge* includes doctoral and professional training toward committee participation and understanding of process. It also includes participants' own experiences as doctoral students as well as dissertation committee participation at previous institutions.
- *Access* includes direct access to doctoral students through core courses, introductions by peers, and programmatic access to doctoral programs. It also includes political and relational access in terms of fit with others in charge.
- *Membership* includes participation on the committee and the willingness to negotiate boundaries with other participants, along with a sense of affinity with the process and other members.

After presenting each of these elements separately, we discuss their development across the early career.

### Knowledge

When participants compared their actual experiences with their ideal, they emphasized what they found lacking in each of these areas. For example, most had served on several dissertation committees, but some were frustrated by not understanding the process or how to negotiate that with other committee members (knowledge). Some believed their participation had been limited due to partiality and active blocking of participation by certain colleagues (access). Still others said they are well prepared and have had opportunities to participate, yet they lack a definite commitment to the committee process (membership).

Participants talked both about their current and previous experiences and perceptions. This led us to consider the developmental nature of the domains of knowledge, access, and membership because active participation as a dissertation committee member requires full functioning within and across these domains. Participants spontaneously referred to their own socialization as doctoral students when describing how they understand the dissertation advising process. They emphasized what they had learned at previous institutions through participation and observation, both in terms of process and politics. Helen, for example, credited her advisor with teaching her the nuances of serving on a dissertation committee. "I learned at the feet of someone who was just incredibly gifted at doing that, so I feel really responsible for carrying on her tradition." Otherwise, when asked to describe her experience at this university, she said that access to doctoral committee work "has been about other faculty members and what they know of your work and your interests. I don't have a sense of any formal way of doing that." Helen's previous institutions did have an "official mentoring structure" for assisting early career faculty in these matters.

Like Helen, Mary said that her participation on dissertation committees has mirrored her own experience as a student. "It's very much the way I was treated in my program." She

acknowledged that other students in that program “were pushed in directions that really weren’t their own interests; but they did it so they could get done; and they did it so that they could work with a person that they wanted to work with.” On the other hand, Mary said she “had a really, really good dissertation experience that I would want to replicate for other people.”

Vivian also noted that her own experience as a student taught her much about the dissertation advising process, adding that her mentor aggressively prepared her for the professoriate. However, her own approach to dissertation advising has also been influenced by her move from one institution to another. Vivian decided she needed to understand her current College better rather than relying only on her student experience. “I just wanted to get my feet under me and figure out what I’m doing before I get overly involved.” This decision has led her to observe more and participate less. Now she questions whether her early participation has been adequate; “I probably could have done a lot more to seek out students than I did.”

Like the others, Hannah relied heavily on her own doctoral experience to guide her, but she quickly pointed out that her experience taught her that committees function as social and political entities:

In my own doctoral experience, we were told very seriously to “choose your major professor first. Make sure you work well with that major professor.” The next step was to then sit down and identify people with whom that professor can work. We were told it’s very political, so “be cautious, be very cautious.”

## Access

All participants understood the value of participation. Interestingly, all but one of the participants noted complications with gaining access. Some identified structural issues of how committees form around specific programs, and that structure can inhibit participation by others. Katie said she knew participation on committees was valued, saying, “I have found that it’s part of our evaluation process, even though it’s not explicitly stated. On my contract renewal evaluation, the only statement made was that I should look for ways to work more with doctoral students.” However, she found it difficult to connect with students:

If [a student] comes in with [a certain] primary concentration, what I’ve found is that they will go and talk to the coordinator of the program.... It’s a mystery how they get to that person, but . . . What has been explained to me is: “Well, once you teach some courses, then people will get to know you, and they’ll ask you.”

The problem, Katie said, is that access depends on where students “are in the program. Because if the course that you teach isn’t until later in the program and they’ve already established their advising committee... [her answer trailed off].” She eventually taught a doctoral course earlier in the program, and her access to committees changed considerably.

Like Katie, Mary said, “It’s a little hard to break into the doctoral world here.” She added that she understands the logic of visibility and access.

The people who teach the classes are the ones who meet the students. I would have never picked a chair for my committee that I didn’t already have experience and exposure to on a personal level. So, I understand why students don’t just randomly go through the guide and go, “Hey, ‘gee, I like the topic of that article. Let me just pick this person for my committee.” I think that’s one of the challenges of getting to work with doctoral students. Unless you’re interfacing with them at some level . . ., I think it is hard to break in.



Vivian took a different position about doctoral committee participation; she intentionally limited her access in order to first learn the culture of dissertation advising. She also noted the location of her office as a prominent factor in her access. “I keep my door closed a lot because the hall is noisy; it’s not just traffic, but there’s the computer labs and classrooms with video going on.” At her previous institution, she had “made a point of being more visible. I have not made as many efforts here in part because I’m laying low my first year.”

Marilyn pursued access early on in her faculty career. She sought to participate in a course that encourages faculty members to discuss their research interests with first-year doctoral students. “I have actually asked to [participate] so that I have at least some face time with the doc students. There aren’t any spaces this semester.” Marilyn was not going to let the schedule get in the way of her access; “I had enough foresight to not just email the professor who is handling this situation but also the Dean.” Looking forward to her application for tenure, Marilyn said, “Listen, this is a worry for me, and I need to make some inroads—sooner better than later.”

Unlike Vivian who approached participation cautiously and Marilyn who sought participation, Marguerite relied on the process to work itself out:

When I first began here, I had absolutely not a clue.... I was fortunate enough to be asked to be on some committees . . . . I guess I figured out that, as a junior faculty member, you were asked. But I didn’t know how that occurred.

After speaking to a doctoral seminar, Marguerite found that she was included in more committees. “As a result of that, a student or so would come and say, ‘Would you be on my doctoral committee?’” For Marguerite, gaining access to dissertation participation was a “multi-year process” of learning to create and take advantage of opportunities.

Hannah commented on the social aspects of access to doctoral committees, noting the tendency of individuals to clump together around disciplinary knowledge or other common interests. “The people I’m working with, I’m enjoying working with; so I’m getting more and more offers from those same people. I think you form a clique.” Hannah quickly pointed out that, for her, the term “clique” is “just a self grouping around an issue.” A social group might form around “an intellectual sameness, it may be a methodological sameness, ... maybe pedagogical.” The core of many dissertation committee cliques, she said, is like-mindedness. These dissertation cliques, she said, “do not change drastically over time.”

## Membership

When participants discussed their relationship to the committee process and to committee members, particularly the chair, most described a sense of membership based on belonging or not belonging. They expected to build this sense of membership through knowledge and access by becoming familiar with their colleagues and the system of advising; but they also described a desire to serve *with* their colleagues, not just serve *on* a committee. Participant stories revealed two extremes in terms of membership: becoming an insider and remaining an outsider.

Katie expressed high regard for working with doctoral students as she thought that “was a little bit higher level work” handled by “more senior people.” She was comfortable working with advising master’s students, so she decided to wait her turn: “My time would come later.” She also noticed structural issues regarding how doctoral students identify committee members. “The people coming in seem to go straight to the senior person or people in charge.” Katie said there is a “core faculty” who “tend to keep themselves on the committee as the chair.” As for the other committee members, she believes these core members choose “the other senior people they’re really close to.” This experience echoes

Hannah's discussion of committee cliques, but with one major exception: Katie attributed these choices to intentional exclusion due to the personal agendas of certain faculty groups who dominate the dissertation committee process while Hannah emphasized the positive aspects of membership due to "like-mindedness."

Helen told the harshest story of exclusion, a personal account of being allowed and even encouraged to participate on dissertation committees while at the same time being reminded she is there because she is Black. She criticized this nod to diversity:

I felt very strongly that the student was allowed to ask me to serve on the committee because it was a test, in a sense, of me and how I fit in. ... I'm going to be very up front. As an African-American, frequently I am either the first or the only one who served on a particular faculty. And I know I am always watched. I am an item of curiosity. I've always felt that some of the anxiety that comes along with being the only or the first.

Helen referred to her "own history and the history for other faculty of color," saying dissertation participation is "one of the areas in which they struggle to feel like they are part of the community. Her experiences have led her to conclude, "if there is going to be one area where access is denied or limited for me as a person of color, it's going to be in those areas that are highly valued by faculty." So why does she continue to participate?

I've been asked to serve on committees with students who wanted to explore issues related to race or issues related to culture, and frequently I would be the only person of color on those committees.... I was interested in having students not over generalize, not stereotype, and really take an honest look at the design... interpreting what they have in a way that wasn't just "missionary".... I never turned a committee of that nature down because I just simply had gotten sick and tired of people who are not people of color doing bad research and imposing their will in communities of color.

Helen admitted the "reality of being a junior faculty [member]" dictated how she participated. "The faculty member who gave the OK for [my participation] was also likely to be someone in the process of tenure and promotion who would be in a position to make a decision about me professionally." While she had looked forward to serving on a dissertation committee, she believed she needed "to be perceived as a good citizen, as a team player." For Helen, "It would not have been politically wise to say 'no.' It's as simple as that."

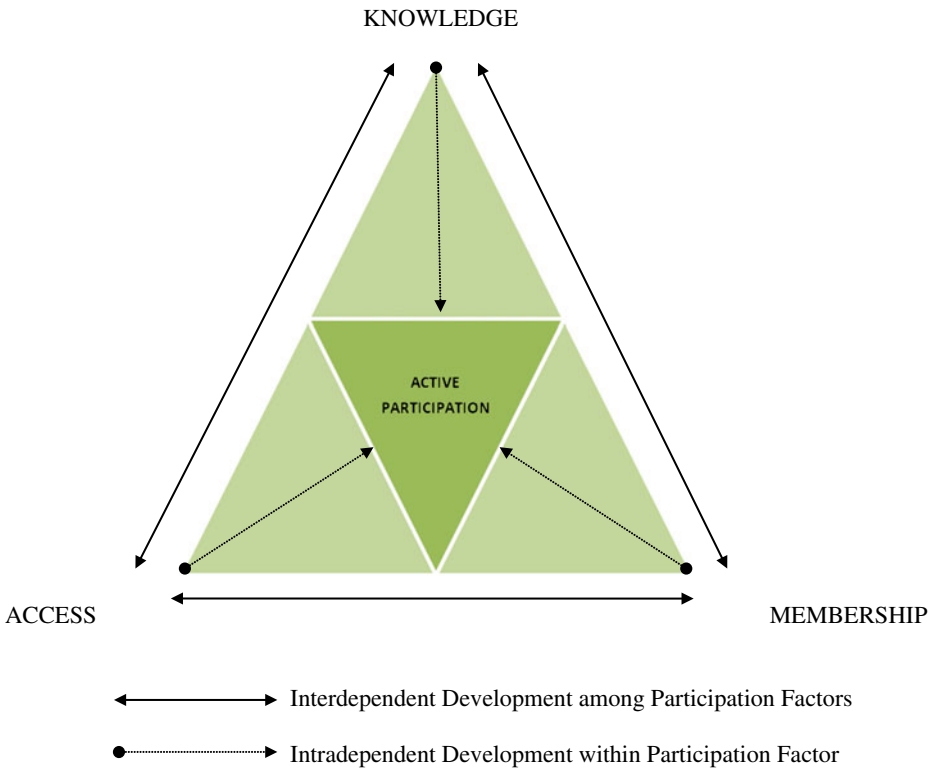
#### Development Across Early Career

We noticed four patterns of development related to dissertation committee participation in terms of career stage. These patterns bridge the three elements of full participation—knowledge, access, and membership—connecting participant stories to their professional development as early career faculty members. (See Fig. 1.)

First, perceptions of what dissertation committee participation achieves was described in the earliest career phase as abstract. It becomes more concrete by the third year, even if the faculty member has participated only sporadically. Mary was quick to say, "There's no decision. I need the experience." Perhaps this is the structural socialization and communication of expectations in general conversations and through evaluation reviews; or it could occur through general conversation and interaction, combined with the evaluation process. As Katie suggested, "I felt like I learned while I was doing it. I feel more prepared now."

Second, the earliest career faculty members allowed their roles on the committee to be defined externally by the chair, their discipline, and even the student. Most relied on their

DOMAINS OF ACTIVE FACULTY PARTICIPATION ON DISSERTATION COMMITTEES



**Fig. 1** Full and active participation on dissertation committees requires development within and across three domains: knowledge, access, and membership

doctoral experience. For example, new faculty, like Vivian, said they do not know how “to actually prepare to be on a dissertation committee except from experiences as a student.” Katie thought the professors were doing her a favor by including her on committees. As the faculty members moved toward third year—with its mandatory contract renewal evaluation—participants began to claim more ownership of the role and duties associated with participation. Those with the most experience recognized that students have “limited views” of the role and understand that becoming committee chair develops “over time.”

Third, early in their careers participation was defined in terms of “points” toward teaching reduction and connection of their own research to student research. Marguerita admitted, “When I first began here, I had absolutely no clue.” However, as faculty members developed a sense of “belonging” to the institution and profession, their perceptions of participation benefits began to include personal satisfaction, overall student development, oversight of research integrity, and contribution as a member of the local and national academic communities. For Hannah, participation did not provide a sense of satisfaction, i.e., “I read something and offer feedback, at the very end, I still get counted as a member,” until she found her own “clique.”

Fourth, those participants just joining the faculty ranks defined non-participation as an issue of personal equity based on identity markers such as sex, gender, and ethnicity. When asked if she thought membership was equitable, Marguerita was emphatic, “Absolutely not!” Reflecting

on herself as a new faculty member, she wondered if “perhaps this is because I was not confident enough yet to say, ‘You know, I’d like to serve on a committee. What do I do to do that?’” Further along in their careers, participants categorized non-participation as structural equity based on inherent systemic issues associated with program and discipline membership.

## Discussion

The popular image of the dissertation committee is of a didactic relationship between faculty mentor and student protégé. This study highlighted the complicated social structure of dissertation participation for early career faculty members, who identified three elements of full participation: knowledge, access, and membership. We now discuss these elements in relationship to doctoral and faculty socialization, situated learning and communities of practice, and access to dissertation advising as a politicized faculty reward.

### Knowledge

The findings of this study provide additional evidence of the impact of anticipatory socialization through student experiences (Austin and McDaniels 2006; Tierney and Rhoads 1993). These initial experiences train students about the “unspoken rules and regulations as future faculty members” (Reybold 2003–2004, p. 28). In turn, these experiences become the knowledge base for faculty members during the early career (Austin 2002, 2003). For participants in this study, this was obviously the case as they reflected on the relationship of their choices as dissertation committee members to their own experiences as students.

Anticipatory socialization as doctoral students is not just a matter of internalizing faculty behaviors; it also is a time when “non-members take on the attitudes, actions, and values of the group to which they aspire” (Tierney and Rhoads 1993, p. 23). In other words, this is when prospective faculty members are forming their initial professional identity (Reybold 2003; 2003–2004), which will inform their everyday work lives—including dissertation committee participation. While socialization to the professorate can be characterized in terms of career phases (Tierney and Rhoades 1993; Weidman et al. 2001), the impact of socialization on professional identity is continuous across these phases. Early socialization experiences as a doctoral student or as a faculty member at another institution, shape future faculty practice.

### Access

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of community of practice points to the connection between socialization and professional identity. Ultimately, they said, identity is an “evolving form of membership” (p. 53), with the goal being full participation. Wenger (1998) articulated two critical aspects of this socialization: “mutual engagement” and “the competence of others” (p. 76). Learning to be a faculty member is social; thus relationships are central to how a faculty member experiences the dissertation process. Acknowledging the conflict between what is expected and what is experienced is, in itself, a potential learning tool for faculty development.

The faculty members in our study readily acknowledged their apprehension about the politics of dissertation committee participation and potential for bias. However, their concern about bias mostly involved status (being “junior” faculty members on committees headed by “senior” faculty members) and structure of access. The major exception, of course, was Helen,

the only female African American faculty member in the cohort, who was asked to represent “the Black perspective” on dissertation committees involving race/ethnicity. Experiences like Helen’s are well documented in the literature on faculty service (Baez 2000; Padilla 1994; Reybold and Corda 2011) and faculty rewards (Aguirre 2000; Turner and Meyer 2000).

### Membership

For these participants the composite image of an ideal dissertation committee would be one where everyone had a sense of belonging, there were no barriers to access or membership, and individual expertise was understood and valued. In reality, high ideals are a hindrance to movement through the trials of membership from being new to negotiating participation. Likewise, faculty socialization is a robust process that cannot be fully understood until experienced (Austin and McDaniels 2006). By the third year review, new faculty members were able to identify the personal, professional, and structural barriers to gaining access to student dissertation committees. Participants who had joined the College after having served elsewhere as a faculty member recognized certain barriers as innate in all institutions.

To become authentic, full participation requires more than individual socialization and development of knowledge; it also requires “the competence of others” (Wenger 1998, p. 76). “Mutual engagement” (p. 76) requires building knowledge of process and “shared histories of learning” (p. 103). Thus, relationships influence academic culture bi-directionally (Tierney and Rhoads 1994) and are central to accessing the dissertation process. In the politically-charged arena of dissertation advising, the tension of “becoming old-timers” (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 57) plays itself out through practices like the dissertation in a nonlinear fashion of service.

### Being the “Junior” Member

Acknowledging the conflict between what is expected and what is experienced is, in itself, a faculty development experience (Reybold and Alamia 2008). In this case, much of that conflict was attributed to junior faculty member status, with some participants believing their rank made them more vulnerable to discrimination. As participants moved toward and through the third-year review, their first formal marker of professional stability, they became more aware of their capacity to serve on dissertation committees; and peers also began to recognize that capacity.

For participants in this study active participation on dissertation committees was more than merely reading and commenting on dissertation drafts; it was a display of professional expertise through membership in the community of the dissertation practice. Membership is developmental, not just a set of skills to learn; and it requires a concerted effort on the part of all who support faculty development across the early career.

This study identified a complex situation requiring proactive institutional support. Mentoring opportunities should include exposure to the implicit and subtle aspects of gaining access and becoming participants in the doctoral process. The first years for new faculty have been recognized as a critical time for investiture, i.e., when institutions show they value individual differences while also communicating how to fit into the prevailing culture (Austin and McDaniels 2006; Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Weidman et al. 2001). Informal and unstructured mentoring processes are helpful in building skills and faculty role understanding; but they rarely address the connection between doctoral socialization and early career faculty experiences.

For women and minority faculty members, who are likely to have experienced some degree of bias and discrimination in their doctoral training, unconventional approaches of

investiture may be necessary (Grant and Simmons 2008; Katz 2008). Such programs should recognize that faculty preparation and development efforts should address both context and power that affect the academic career. Granted, in our study discrimination based on sex and gender was a limited theme; and sexism and gender-bias were not identified spontaneously by participants. That does not necessarily mean that discrimination was not an issue, only that we did not ask that question directly. There are several possible reasons for this seeming disconnect between the literature and participants' experience of sexism and gender discrimination. First, their College faculty is predominately white and female. Second, our interview questions were intentionally left open-ended so as to explore participants' primary concerns; those concerns focused on rank and program affiliation. Interestingly, as is the case in most colleges of education, the faculty is predominantly female while the administration is predominantly male. Also, the rank of full professor is held by more men than women in their College. Third, two potential participants declined to be interviewed for fear of retaliation, one because she had perceived sexism in her program and was afraid of the impact on her bid for tenure, another because she was a faculty member of color and was anxious about confidentiality.

### Boundaries, Limitations, and Future Directions

Qualitative studies of local cases have obvious boundaries. These studies are context-dependent, situate a phenomenon in and amongst multiple perspectives, and usually have a small number of participants (compared to studies that seek statistical generalizability); also, these same boundaries are the quintessential features of qualitative inquiry. The boundaries of this study are based on researcher interest and conceptual framework, particularly in terms of research purpose and question development, participant selection criteria, data collection and analysis techniques, and even the literature we chose to review. The most obvious boundary of this study is that we chose to explore a small, local sample in order to understand the experience more deeply (Flyvbjerg 2006). Local cases provide a "nuanced view of reality" (p. 223) that is not available in most larger studies that emphasize aggregation.

Whereas the boundaries of the study define *what is being studied*, limitations define *what is not being studied*. This case study cannot generalize to the broader population in any statistical sense of the term. We do encourage further study of dissertation committee experiences, but we also suggest broad-based national research to examine the range of local experiences. Specifically, further research should extend to include diverse institutional cultures and disciplinary perspectives.

### Conclusion

Membership on dissertation committees is developmental, not just a set of skills to learn; and it requires a concerted effort on the part of all who support faculty development across the early career. Mentoring opportunities should include exposure to the implicit and subtle aspects of gaining access and becoming participants in the doctoral process. While typical mentoring techniques are helpful in building newcomer skills and faculty role understanding, they rarely address the connection between doctoral socialization and early career faculty experiences. For women and minority faculty members, unconventional approaches may be necessary (Grant and Simmons 2008; Katz 2008). Faculty preparation and development efforts should address both context and power that affect the academic career, not just skill development.

Dissertation committees have a unique authority to structure emerging knowledge in their fields of study, to nurture or censure inquiry based on their own expert knowledge.

Experienced and engaged faculty members profoundly affect the scope and tone of future scholarship. Full participation is a responsibility to both the institution and the discipline, but it also is a privilege that demands thoughtful practice.

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