

Coffee, Collaboration, and Confidence Intervals: A Community of Practice for Faculty and Graduate Students

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Positive and productive interactions between graduate students and faculty members are associated with increased graduate student persistence and integration of graduate students into academia (Zhou & Okahana, 2016). Furthermore, department academic support groups, or communities of practice, are critical programmatic factors associated with graduate student success (Zhou & Okahana, 2016). Graduate students often enroll in rigorous courses and many graduate students often take on the roles of teaching in the classroom or conducting research with faculty (Offstein et al., 2004). Beyond coursework, teaching, and research, socialization into the profession occurs during graduate education. It is during this time graduate students come to understand their work and professional roles as future faculty members (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). As graduate students navigate their numerous responsibilities and experiences, a community of practice including graduate students and faculty can be established to support student success and professional growth (deChambeau, 2017)

A community of practice can be described as a group of individuals that share common concerns or passions about a topic, and, through the formation of a shared community, deepen their knowledge and proficiency through ongoing interaction (Wenger et al., 2002). Individuals meet in communities of practice because they find value in their interactions through shared insight, information, and advice. They solve problems together, think about common issues, explore ideas, and brainstorm. They may also create and develop artifacts and ideas together (Wenger et al., 2002). It is through these interactions, individuals accumulate knowledge and are informally connected by the value they find in learning together (Wenger et al., 2002). In addition to the accumulation of knowledge, individuals attain through membership and participation in a community of practice, individuals also accrue personal satisfaction belonging to an interesting group of people.

How it Works

Coffee, Collaboration, and Confidence Intervals (CCC), the nickname for a graduate student mentoring group within the Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences Department at Oregon State University has been ongoing for many years. However, the formal meetings were discontinued during the 2020-2021 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reinstated for the 2021-2022 academic year after a group of graduate students recognized the role the meetings played as they developed as scholars, and professionals.

Faculty and graduate students within the department attended a bi-monthly, hour-long meeting specifically designed to build relationships and connections. These meetings were often used to discuss course content, research collaborations, and to address topics of interest to the graduate students. Some topics that have been covered have included conversations about specific research methodologies, faculty and student research planning and collaboration, conceptual framework development, writing diversity statements, and learning to review empirical manuscripts. Notes were passed on to those that were unable to attend and shared documents were used to extend collaboration beyond the scheduled meeting.

Results to Date/Implications

We solicited feedback about their experience with CCC from the faculty and graduate students within the Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences Department who frequently attended the meetings. This informal survey allowed the faculty and graduate students to provide feedback on their overall thoughts about the CCC meetings, insight to what they felt like they were gaining from attending these meetings, and the value found in participating in these meetings. When posed the question *How has CCC academically, socially, or professionally supported you?* responses indicated that CCC provided participants with a space to connect with colleagues regarding research projects, allowing colleagues to share their research ideas and to collaborate on different research assignments. The response below summarized a majority of the feedback from the participants:

I really value the opportunity to connect specifically about things related to research. We don't have any other mechanisms for doing this in the department and it's really great to have that devoted time to connect. Also, I love the social aspect of it too. It's rare we are all in the same room together and I appreciate that time to check in with each other.

Another question posed was, *What value, if any, have you found in participating in CCC?* Participants found value in the dedicated time that is set aside to learn more about research methods and the opportunity that it presents to learn about the work that is being done amongst colleges, that we don't always have the time to share.

After the implementation of these CCC meetings, we have noticed a greater sense of community and collaboration amongst the faculty and graduate students. These meetings served as a great collaborative practice, where everyone had the opportunity to learn from each other. This time also allowed the opportunity to share innovative ideas about research, solicit advice in about research projects, and to learn about professional roles and responsibilities.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Due to the success of our CCC meetings created for the faculty and graduate students within our department, we have chosen to continue this collaborative practice into the 2022-2023 academic school year. We would advise other departments to create their own CCC meetings, or a similar community of practice, to collaborate with and leverage research that is happening within their own department. CCC is a great way to get faculty and graduate students together to talk about research and other pertinent topics, but of course there are some things to consider for this department implementation to be successful. We suggest that these meetings are planned and that there is an expectation for everyone attend these meetings. For these CCC meetings to be an integral part of a department, there needs to be a mutual understanding regarding the expected commitment from every involved. CCC meetings can be a great way to increase a sense of community and collaboration. They can also serve as a great tool to increase awareness of the research that is being generated within one's department.

Costs/Resources Needed

No extra financial cost was accrued by the faculty, graduate students, or the department when holding these meetings. The time spent by both faculty and graduate students to prepare for, present, or attend CCC was similar to the time spent preparing for or attending similar department meetings. Potential costs could be accrued if external presenters or other activities outside of the department were used, or for actual coffee or refreshments.

References

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