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Together We Go Far: Helping Doctoral Scholars Develop Collaborations in Special Education Research

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Collaboration is an undeniably important part of academic work, making challenging, ambitious research possible and more efficient. Collaboration also serves as a foundation for scholarly networks of individuals with shared interests, values, and goals that support one another in many ways. In addition, collaboration is described as a critical component in recent doctoral funding calls (i.e., U.S. Department of Education, Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities). Despite its importance, few special education scholars receive any formal guidance or training on practical, sustainable collaboration in academia. The need for a framework to support collaborations within special education doctoral training is ever-present. In this article, we discuss key topics that impact collaborative work within and across institutions. We adapted the Community Engagement Continuum framework (McCloskey et al., 2011) to increase collaboration for special education graduate scholars. In addition, we provide advice for faculty members to consider as they guide graduate scholars in creating productive, meaningful professional collaborations.

Keywords: academic partnerships, collaboration, community-engaged continuum, higher education, special education

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In the United States, there are approximately 7.3 million K-12 public school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The students need highly qualified teachers to support them in the classroom. This requires leadership personnel at institutes of higher education to prepare teachers. In addition, to teaching special education courses, leadership personnel supervise preservice teachers and conduct research related to improving outcomes for students with disabilities and their teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Recent calls have been made for special education leaders to consider cross-university collaborations. For example, in both 2021 and 2022, the Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities program incentivized partnerships (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The U.S. Department of Education asserted doctoral-level training proposals must assure "scholars will actively participate in the cross-project collaboration, advanced-trainings, and cross-site learning opportunities" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 18272). This will allow for multi-year, cross-university collaborations during a scholar's graduate studies in special education.

Within higher education, collaboration means working with others or together in an intellectual endeavor such as teaching, research, or service. Developing and maintaining professional partnerships can influence scholarly productivity, personal, professional growth, and job satisfaction (Douglas, 2020; Kezar, 2005; Trower, 2011). In addition, collaboration and interdisciplinary work are linked to lower attrition rates and increased satisfaction within higher education (Mathews, 2014; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994).

Training on effective collaboration is not often present in the formal curriculum (Duffield et al., 2012; Kezar, 2005). Instead, it is often incorporated outside the classroom as part of the scholar's professional experiences (Higher Education Consortium in Special Education, 2014). The extent to which an individual is explicitly taught how to be collaborative depends largely on an individual's program mentor or advisor (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 2014). Some scholars have mentors or advisors who intentionally model and coach their mentees on developing productive partnerships. This includes advisors who include their advisees on projects from the moment they set foot on campus. Others wait for scholars to take the initiative. Exactly where advisor-advisee partnerships fall on this

spectrum is often dependent on the nature and scope of work, the structures within an institution (e.g., collective trainings or orientations for cohorts), and even the advisor's own experiences as a doctoral student. The result is a patchwork of relationships and opportunities that are inequitable and inconsistent within and across institutions. The field of special education is better served when individuals receive intentional and explicit attention to professional collaboration during their special education doctoral studies (Douglas, 2020). These collaborations are viewed not only as critical for moving research forward but are equally important for developing doctoral scholar's competencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

During the 2020-2021 school year, a coalition of graduate scholars affiliated with a professional organization in education (name redacted for peer review) requested a panel discussion related to collaboration focusing on cross-university collaborations. Three special education faculty members within their first six years of academia served as webinar panelists. Following the webinar, the panelists, along with the doctoral scholar in special education moderator, reconvened. The group quickly recognized an absence of information related to higher education collaborations, particularly in special education. The following manuscript is an attempt to fill that void with a cohesive framework and set of practical strategies to support cross-university collaborations for scholars in special education.

Rationale for Collaboration

Many research collaborations are built on translational research which focuses on a common problem with multiple partners who work together to address an issue (Andrews et al., 2009). Translational research combines knowledge of a topic and action to achieve the desired outcome; while crossing the theory-to-practice divide (Andrews et al., 2009; Ball, 2013). When designing studies, researchers hope to close the knowledge gap in a way that leads to improved practice. Within the context of doctoral education, this implies doctoral scholars need critical background knowledge and a pathway to translate that knowledge into practices that improve educational outcomes for all students (Ball, 2013).

As researchers conduct studies, whether it is an observation project, intervention, or literature review, they collaborate with others to complete inter-observer agreement or inter-

rater reliability (Ledford & Gast, 2018). Reliability is central to credibility and trustworthiness (Ledford & Gast, 2018). Further, rigorous research often requires researchers from different regions, institutions, or areas of expertise (Cook et al., 2020; Horner et al., 2005). Even small-scale projects require specific skills, expertise, and time that may require multiple partners. Collaborators can provide a different perspective or approach that helps shape the work and enables a supportive environment. Likewise, securing research funding from major sources such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), or private foundations typically requires a team of individuals with highly developed skills and experience. With well-equipped teams and networks, funding organizations may have greater confidence in a researcher's ability to carry a project to fruition. Furthermore, assembling a competent research team for the proposed project signals the principal investigator truly understands the scope and complexity of work as well as the level of skill required to carry out such a project. Therefore, developing the skills to initiate and maintain productive collaborations is as critical to doctoral training as any other singular skill.

Research teams with mutual interests or complementary skills more effectively or efficiently achieve goals. Though, as Weinberg and Harding (2004) note, there are many benefits to collaboration outside of transactional, collaboration enriches academic work experience in ways that may be greater than the sum of its parts. Collaboration enables a pathway to mutual respect, appreciation, and understanding (Kochan & Mullen, 2003). Collaboration also creates a means for ongoing professional learning, access to different viewpoints and generally leads to a more fulfilling professional experience (Weinberg & Harding, 2004).

Research benefits from a diversity of thought, background, and expertise. Specifically, it is imperative to explore collaborations with scholars of diverse backgrounds. Historically, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression have plagued the academy (Croom, 2017; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). This has led to an overrepresentation of white men in tenure-line positions (Espinosa et al., 2019). In a study on women's experiences collaborating in higher education, researchers found that women commonly reported not receiving due credit for their contributions from deference to senior or male colleagues despite having shouldered the

primary intellectual contributions (Kochan & Mullen, 2003). This was often reflected in the order of authorship on manuscripts, which impacts institutional decisions on promotion and tenure (Broderick & Casadevall, 2019; Kochan & Mullen, 2003;).

Moreover, experiences vary dramatically, particularly among minoritized populations. Dr. Mildred Boveda described her experience as a Black Latina doctoral student, "I did not realize how white these special education spaces were becoming until deep into my doctoral program. Because of senior colleagues' desire to support me, I initially felt safe. And yet, I remember that there was one Black woman involved during my time on the Miami CEC [Council for Exceptional Children] board" (Boveda & McCray, 2021, p. 7). In addition, to feeling isolated, Black and Latina/o scholars may be subject to different expectations and experiences than their white counterparts (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). As we work to form a better academy, we must recognize our past and form inclusive collaborations.

As scholars consider collaboration opportunities, it is essential to consider such collaborations' personal and aggregate impact. To help turn the tide, faculty members must strategically enact more inclusive and supportive environments for graduate scholars. This prompts one to consider the role of translational research related to collaborative work (Andrews et al., 2009). Of particular importance is how to build a research partnership, while also acquiring both the knowledge and skills necessary to lead future inquiries. In the following section, we outline the phases of collaboration. Following this, we provide strategies for faculty members to help build successful scholarly collaborations and positively impact the university culture and climate.

Collaboration in Stages

Purposeful and productive collaborations take time to develop. They are formed through meaningful interactions, opportunities, communications, and leadership. Given the focus of building collaborations, one potentially helpful model is the Community Engagement Continuum framework (McCloskey et al., 2011), which is designed to build coalitions between community members, health professionals, and researchers. The Community Engaged Framework emerged in the 2000s in the field of nursing and community health (McCloskey et al., 2011). More recently the framework has been explored in education (Hirsch & Walker,

2022). As a practice-based research, community engagement involves principles such as recognizing and respecting the various cultures of a community, mobilizing community assessments and strengths, collaboration requires commitments, and other factors including developing partnerships to create change and improve health. As such, community engagement fits well as a framework for supporting collaborations within special education doctoral training (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Collaboration in Stages for Faculty Advisors

Stages	**Strategy**
Outreach	☐ Connect with scholars via email or another form of communication. Be clear about the reason for wanting to meet. ☐ Before the meeting, provide the scholar with some background information about your work. ☐ During the meeting, provide scholars with information on current projects and research methods. ☐ Determine whether interests align and are complementary. **Outcome**: Establish an initial communication
Develop	☐ Prepare a list of questions to gauge student interests, availability, and topics to explore. ☐ Co-develop a brief overview of research interests and overlap. ☐ Share current and future projects and potential student role. ☐ Create an initial plan. **Outcome:** An initial plan based on overlapped research interests
Consult	☐ Identify a shared goal or vision. ☐ Select a project. ☐ Discuss each partner's work style, pace, schedule, and norms. ☐ Be clear about roles and responsibilities of each member of the project. ☐ Create a timeline including dates for meetings. **Outcome:** A more detailed plan with timeline
Involve	☐ Submit protocols that follow university Institutional Review Board (IRBs). ☐ Decide on a project management structure. ☐ Update the timeline. **Outcome:** Submit protocols and decide on a project management structure
Collaborate	☐ Evaluate the project periodically. ☐ Communicate frequently. **Outcome:** Assess the collaboration

Note. *The Community Engagement Continuum (McCloskey et al., 2011) stages were adapted to demonstrate collaborations between faculty members and graduate students*

The Community Engagement framework provides stakeholders with a continuum of involvement, emphasizing how partnerships (like collaborations) evolve from time-limited

projects to long-term partnerships (McCloskey et al., 2011). Figure 1 provides an overview of specific stages of the framework. This framework has successfully created school-university partnerships to support students with disabilities (see Hirsch & Walker, 2022).

For this article, we adapted the framework to demonstrate collaborations between faculty members and graduate scholars within the context of higher education research. Using the framework of community engagement, we provide the following considerations from our own collaboration experiences. We unpack each phase of collaboration as it relates both broadly to academic work and specifically to special education research. Within the sections, we embed recommendations for supporting graduate scholars in the 21st century with a focus on contemporary research. The framework and strategies are transferable to other forms of collaboration such as collaboration in teaching courses, designing curriculum, and serving on committees.

Outreach

Initiating academic collaborations for graduate scholars can be exciting and intimidating. However, it is very important to understand that effective collaborations do not necessarily begin naturally or without effort. They can start within a graduate program by connecting with other students or faculty members, or with a faculty member sending an email or asking a scholar to discuss a topic. They can also be formed by providing a scholar with some information about a project and gauging interest. The goal of the initial outreach is to see whether interests align and are complementary. This is a good time to discuss research topics and methodologies. The outcome of this phase is to establish a communication channel (McCloskey et al., 2011) that allows for more comfort with reaching out with questions, feedback, or to discuss opportunities, among others. Although many of these initial meetings may be informal, it is still essential to provide the scholars with some background information before the meeting. For example, faculty can share a brief overview of their research or a few articles to set the stage for a discussion.

Outreach can also happen virtually on social media. Social media offers a view into a potential collaborator's specific research interests, professional and/or social network, their personal versus professional boundaries, and even their sense of humor. Ones' social media

presence can offer clues about whether or not a potential collaboration is a good fit. Outreach through social media can begin simply by liking a post, retweeting an interesting article, or asking a question within someone's area of experience or expertise. Generally, the mere existence of a public social media profile indicates a willingness to interact with an expansive circle of contacts. In our experience, special education scholars want to do good for others and are genuinely pleased to know their work matters. Even if initial contacts do not result in a substantive collaboration, there is little risk and high reward in reaching out with a kind remark, question, or compliment via social media.

Develop

Once an initial communication is established, it is wise to co-develop a brief overview of one's research interests and initial plan. This could be a list of the top three topics and potential areas of overlap. When meeting with a graduate scholar for the first time, it is useful to have a few prepared questions about their interests, availability, and topics they hope to explore. At the same time, it would be helpful to begin sharing current and future projects. This not only helps to gauge interest in particular topics but also begins to shape students' expectations for the scope and scale of projects, along with their potential role. An outcome for this phase may include an initial plan based on overlapped research interests, long-term goals, and current workload.

Development of an initial plan can be formal or informal. Planning can range from a simple conversation to a string of emails, to a written plan. The key at this stage of development is to communicate clearly about goals, expectations, and limitations. This initial exchange of ideas can help both parties determine if a collaboration is indeed a good fit. It is very important at this stage to gather information of one another to determine if a collaboration is feasible and mutually beneficial. Though it may be tempting to jump straight to a project we encourage everyone take their time in development and avoid hasty decisions that may lead to further problems in the future.

Consult

Faculty can implement three actions when beginning collaborations. First, they can be advantageous to identify a shared goal or vision. This is a great time to discuss opportunities

and where you would like to partner. We think it is beneficial to start small. Based on our collective experiences, we recommend starting with one project rather than multiple projects. Initial projects can be a panel presentation, manuscript, or partnering on a project already underway.

Second, during this initial collaboration, they can discuss each partner's work style, pace, schedule, and norms. Providing this information upfront will help scholars understand each other's work habits. This way, scholars are not surprised if one member completes tasks immediately after receiving them and the other member completes their task the day before the deadline. Being transparent upfront could help prevent hiccups down the road.

Third, they can be clear about the roles and responsibilities of each member of the project. Based on our collective experiences, we recommend outlining the project, assigning roles, and creating a timeline. The outline should be specific enough for each member to be able to complete their task. The unique roles of each member should also be defined, and authorship order should be discussed. The collaborators should also embrace creating a timeline including dates for meetings. At this juncture, an outcome may include a detailed plan with a timeline.

At this stage is often helpful to think about the end goals and construct a timeline in reverse. For example, when planning a research project that must be completed by the end of the academic year, the team must build in sufficient time for execution of the project, recruitment of participants, development of materials, application for funding, application for approval of human subjects research, and time to handle unexpected situations may arise. Backward planning can help determine a potential start date and assess if such a collaboration is feasible.

Involve

In a cross-university research project, both university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) need to be consulted. IRB protocols must be followed. Although one collaborator may be the primary investigator, the other collaborator will also need to submit the protocol to their university. For example, all collaborators will need to have current Collaborative Institutional

Training Initiative (CITI) certificates. Also, each scholar will need to submit an IRB application regardless of their role within the research.

Both small and large collaborations require a project management structure to support the collaboration. Technology resources can be leveraged to help teams organize tasks, communicate, and share documents. Programs such as Google Drive and Dropbox are free file-sharing platforms. A file-sharing program reduces the need for emailing documents and helps collaborators work synchronously on the same documents. Project management programs such as Microsoft Teams and Asana offer users the opportunity to communicate online, track project progress in real-time, and allow multiple people to work remotely on the same tasks. Asana integrates with Slack, Google Drive, and Mailchimp. All of the tools (i.e., Google Drive, Dropbox, Microsoft Teams, Asana) are available both on the web and as computer-based applications. When selecting a collaboration tool, check with one's university to determine the best site to store data and other research-related documents securely. Collaborators should revisit the timeline that was previously created to help keep everyone accountable. The timeline should include periodic check-ins to check on progress as well as long-term goals. The outcome for this phase may include submitting protocols and deciding on a project management structure.

Collaborate

We, as authors, recognize that maintaining a relationship or collaboration is part of the work. As noted above, collaborations can take many forms (e.g., manuscripts, research projects, panel presentations) – we have highlighted only a few formats that appear relevant for graduate and early career scholars. No doubt, there are a plethora of other forms of collaboration. Regardless of the collaboration task, it is essential to gauge or evaluate the project periodically. Specific questions can include: Did we meet the task(s) we set out to complete? Did we complement each other? Are different perspectives represented? If not, who is missing from future collaborations? What can we do to improve our collaborations? What are supports necessary to continue to collaborate? For example, would it be advantageous to schedule more frequent meetings or meet less frequently? These are just a few sample questions. Regardless of the questions asked and answered, the most important part about

maintaining a collaboration is communication. Clear, frequent communication is essential to any effective and sustainable collaboration.

Tips for Advisors

In this section we highlight strategies for advisors. These tips also apply to supporting early-career faculty members. First, advisors in positions of power or privilege must support all of their students, especially women, scholars of color, or other minoritized groups. Advisors should take clear, visible steps such as initiating collaborations among diverse groups, supporting their appointment to leadership positions, and featuring their work in public forums. These public actions provide direct support to individuals and send a broader message of support at an institutional level. Such a move also signals that minoritized groups and individuals' contributions are not only valued but part and parcel of the institution itself.

Second, advisors must take active steps to normalize and institutionalize practices that support effective and inclusive collaborations. For instance, in the early stages of project development, collaborators should discuss roles, contributions, and authorship order. In some cases, collaborators may avoid these conversations in the early stages out of fear of overstepping implicit boundaries, seeming too ambitious, or breaking some other social norm. However, failure to engage in these conversations early on can lead to assumptions and potential conflict. Discussing the order of authorship in the early stages of a project proactively prevents future issues and sets up clear expectations for everyone involved. These conversations need to not only be regular but expected.

Authorship and Beyond

Advisors often pursue or engage in professional opportunities such as publishing scholarly work, presenting at local and national conferences, and collaborating with professional partners on research endeavors. These opportunities are not just professionally advantageous for faculty; They are remarkable opportunities for elevating the work of graduate scholars and early career scholars. Consider every opportunity you are engaged in, and ask oneself: How might I use this opportunity to support my graduate student's growth? It may be offering the opportunity to co-present so that scholars can improve upon their public speaking skills. Or it may be inviting them to join a meeting with potential research collaborators, so that

they may see how these relationships are formed. As for co-authoring a publication, even the opportunity to contribute to a literature search or edit the final draft of a manuscript can provide a remarkable opportunity for a student to read and understand professional writing, strengthen their editorial skills, and add a publication to their curricula vita, will benefit them. Moreover, involving doctoral students in a manuscript can illuminate the, often opaque, process of drafting and revision. Inviting students to contribute to a manuscript will help them get a better understanding the internal processes, hard work, and multiple rounds of revision that go into producing a publishable manuscript. As faculty, many of us had mentors who used their positions in the field to elevate us. Now is your opportunity to do the same, and it costs nothing.

Networking as a part of Mentorship

Connections with current and future colleagues often come about through introductions made at conferences, through professional networks and organizations, collaborations on papers, or over email. Additionally, many faculty also make connections through personal interactions: in the parking lot of their children's school, through gyms or exercise groups, and participation in community groups such as local social justice branches or houses of worship. Modeling the dynamic ways you make professional connections for our scholars is equally important as helping them establish these connections themselves. As an advisor, a critical aspect of mentorship is to use one's professional relationships to highlight scholars' work and contributions and assist them in developing these connections as they move into the field. These networking opportunities may lead to future employment opportunities, scholarly collaborations, and even lifelong friendships.

We strongly encourage faculty mentors and advisors to consider the many ways in which they interact with fellow scholars and put forth effort and opportunities for their mentees. This can include crafting an email to introduce a student to a colleague at another institution, making an in-person introduction at a professional event, or (with permission) sharing a mentee's work with a colleague that may be interested. Items such as this typically take little time or effort but may lead to invaluable opportunities that extend beyond the curriculum or program requirements.

Leading by Example

One of the greatest professional tools is also one of the simplest: be a kind person, the type of person others want to work with. For many of us, we collaborate with scholars who we also happen to like. They are humble, supportive, smart, and professional. It is essential to be transparent about this necessary quality, and even more important to teach and lead by example. Create learning environments in the classroom or on your research team that set others up for success. Welcome and support new ideas, support collaborative learning whereby everyone has the expertise they bring to the table, and allow others to be human by supporting those human needs. This may include welcoming children at meetings or conferences, allowing for individuals to choose to have their cameras on or off during Zoom calls, and debriefing stressful or painful world events before diving into the tasks at hand. We are all so much more than the research we do, and part of cultivating dynamic future scholars is to demonstrate what it looks like to be someone that others want to work with.

Final Thoughts

The framework, tips, and strategies presented here are merely one side of the proverbial equation. This paper stresses the important role faculty play in developing long-term collaborations for scholars. To this end, we offered strategies and considerations based on the community-engaged partnership framework. While these considerations are relevant to doctoral scholars, they may also be salient for conducting cross-site and cross-university partnerships. We believe the community-engaged partnership framework is relevant to research as well as helping doctoral scholars acquire research competencies and build their own professional networks (Douglas, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Though the suggestions presented are primarily focused on faculty, it is important to recognize that each suggestion is complementary for budding scholars. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of faculty can help early career scholars better manage their collaborations and expectations. Entering partnerships more clear-eyed will lead to more pleasant and fruitful collaborations for faculty and emerging scholars. We also recognize each institution is unique (i.e., program requirements) and therefore we recommend adapting the framework to meet your setting and program.

Not every opportunity for collaboration is going to be successful. It is often said that persistence is the fuel that drives success. The same is valid for collaborations. Collaborations can fizzle, fall apart, or fail to get off the ground for many professional or personal reasons. It is important not to be dissuaded or discouraged by these experiences. The most productive and meaningful collaborations require time and commitment toward shared goals. Just as one must learn to persist in the face of manuscript rejection, one must be persistent in forming and maintaining professional collaborations. We encourage all scholars to approach collaboration with kindness, appreciation, flexibility, and shared goals. Professional collaboration is not merely a means to an end but a vital outcome in and of itself.

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