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# Methodological Trends, Gaps, and Challenges in Doctoral Research on Community Engagement

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## Methodological Trends, Gaps, and Challenges in Doctoral Research on Community Engagement

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### Abstract

The field of community engagement in higher education has expanded significantly in the last three decades. Its varied disciplinary perspectives, diverse stakeholders, and wide-ranging cultural contexts have positively contributed to student learning outcomes and community impact. With this expansion comes methodological challenges for doctoral scholars of community engagement, who often lack guidance around conducting community-engaged research that may question traditional epistemologies and ontologies. In this systematic literature review, we analyzed 36 dissertations published between 2018 and 2022 to identify the trends, gaps, and challenges in doctoral research on community engagement. Challenges identified included rethinking research designs, expanding subjects and participants, promoting cross-cultural and global studies, and revisiting epistemological and ontological stances. Recommendations include an open-access dissertation repository, formalized support for graduate students, recognition of “trendbreaking” scholars, and wider embrace of the global network of researchers of community engagement.

**Keywords:** *community engagement, dissertations, doctoral students, graduate education, research methods*

## Tendencias, brechas y desafíos metodológicos en la investigación doctoral en extensión universitaria

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### Resumen

El campo de la extensión universitaria en la educación superior se ha ampliado significativamente en las últimas tres décadas. Sus variadas perspectivas disciplinarias, los diversos actores involucrados y los variados contextos culturales han contribuido positivamente a los resultados de aprendizaje de los estudiantes y al impacto en la comunidad. Esta expansión conlleva retos metodológicos para los estudiantes de doctorado investigando la extensión universitaria, que a menudo carecen de orientación para llevar a cabo una investigación basada en la comunidad que cuestione epistemologías y ontologías tradicionales. En esta revisión sistemática de la literatura, analizamos 36 tesis doctorales publicadas entre 2018 y 2022 para identificar las tendencias, las brechas y los desafíos en la investigación doctoral sobre extensión universitaria. Los desafíos identificados incluyen repensar los diseños de investigación, ampliar los sujetos y participantes, promover estudios interculturales y globales y revisar las posturas epistemológicas y ontológicas. Las recomendaciones incluyen un repositorio de tesis doctorales de acceso abierto, un apoyo sostenido a los estudiantes de posgrado, el reconocimiento de las y los académicos «rompedores de tendencias» y una mayor inclusión de la red mundial de investigadores en extensión universitaria.

**Palabras clave:** *compromiso comunitario, disertaciones, estudiantes de doctorado, educación de posgrado, métodos de investigación*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by Matías G. Flores  
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As community engagement has become more academically integrated into higher education globally, the research on community engagement has traced this growth from multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives. The richness of the field's practice-based approach is complicated by multiple definitions of community, university, and engagement, diverse cultural contexts, and the various stakeholders involved in community engagement projects and research. The myriad disciplinary and epistemological bases of the scholarship of engagement, while contributing to the field's transformative reach, can yield a largely contested knowledge base.

In this complicated scenario, doctoral researchers seeking to study community engagement become representations of how emerging scholars address these challenges. Their dissertations, particularly their research method designs, become key artifacts to access their thought process and decision-making from where the field<sup>1</sup> can identify trends, gaps, and new challenges. While some studies have focused on graduate student support in pursuing engaged scholarship (Cloutier et al., 2022; Jaeger et al., 2014), there remains a knowledge gap regarding doctoral research in the scholarship of higher education community engagement.

Through an analysis of 36 dissertations published between 2018 and 2022, this review explored how doctoral students are researching community engagement and raising awareness of graduate students' unique needs and challenges as they become the next generation of scholars studying community engagement in an increasingly globalized world.

We, as current or recent doctoral students and members of the Graduate Student Network of the International Association for Research on Community Engagement and Service-Learning (IARSLCE), find value in learning from peers and their struggles. We identify ourselves as practitioner-scholars working and studying across three countries with multi-disciplinary research, spanning the topics of students, faculty, and institutions. Our varied personal experiences with research on community engagement led to a wider dialogue around graduate education in the field and how students can best be supported. We also recognize that we must approach this research with an awareness that culturally and socially diverse graduate students often have different research needs and career aspirations shaped by their respective global contexts.

This article stems from our experiences with two events we organized in the last two years: a roundtable discussion at the 2023 IARSLCE Conference and a professional development IARSLCE webinar in spring 2024. These events affirmed the importance of analyzing the challenges faced by graduate students in a practice-driven field such as community engagement. Understanding the trends, gaps, and challenges in this recent selection of doctoral dissertations begins to coalesce these shared challenges and puts forward recommendations to strengthen the contributions of this next generation of scholars.

## **Review of the Literature**

Although we could not find specific antecedents in doctoral studies on community engagement, we identified two strands of literature that inform this systematic literature review. First was the study of research methods in the fields of higher education and community engagement, and second, the study of doctoral engaged researchers.

In the field of higher education, studies have explored research methods in systematic literature reviews of articles from selected journals. Tight (2013) explored ten higher education journals and identified a relative balance between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies (53% and 42%, respectively); surveys, document analysis, and interview-based studies made up 91% of the analyzed articles. In contrast, Wells et al. (2015) restricted the analysis to three of the most prestigious higher education journals and found a steep divide where, between 2006 and 2010, only 19.3% utilized qualitative methodologies.

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<sup>1</sup> We understand the field of community engagement as an emerging field that includes experiences and research on engaged learning and engaged research, usually framed under a diverse range of concepts such as engaged scholarship, public engagement, third mission, service-learning, civic engagement, and many other terms in languages different to English.

These publications have spurred a debate regarding the reason behind the concentration on quantitative research (Huisman, 2024), while others have pointed out concerning genderized uses of research methods in the field (Williams et al., 2018). Additionally, Wells et al. (2015) reflect on the key role of graduate research training in reproducing certain paradigmatic approaches. Instead of concentrating graduate training on the dominant methods, that is, advanced statistical methods, they argue graduate education should be concerned with “the potential danger of delegitimizing alternative methodological approaches” (Wells et al., 2015, p. 190). Similarly, the advancement of research methods in the relatively new field of community engagement has been one of the primary challenges (Richard, 2016; Richard & Simon, 2015). Compared with the field of higher education, advancements made in community engagement are still limited.

In the field of community engagement, several studies have included research methods as categories among broader research systematic reviews. Jones and Lee (2017) analyzed ten years of scholarship in one journal to describe trends, research methods being one of the seven categories included. They found that 61% of the articles published by this journal were qualitative studies, with case studies and surveys as the most common research methods (24% and 20%, respectively). Likewise, a 2016 review of the most influential empirical studies from the previous 25 years in the field indicates an abundance of research using case-based methods (Abes et al., 2002; Bloomgarden & O’Meara, 2007; Holland, 1997; O’Meara, 2002; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) and quantitative surveys (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Demb & Wade, 2012; O’Meara, 2006; Vogelgesang et al., 2010) and a clear deficit in quantitative methods (Sandmann et al., 2016).

In a more recent literature review, Koekkoek et al. (2021) determined that the field lacked empirical research and needed to expand the use of theories and methods. They suggest the field should promote meta-analysis, mixed methods, ethnographies, policy and discourse analysis, comparative case studies, and impact studies. Other studies have addressed the challenges of specific data collection techniques, for example, surveys (Kolek, 2013), or sub-disciplines, for example, Language Education (Baker, 2019).

Research about doctoral dissertations in higher education community engagement has focused mostly on the support for community engagement in graduate education. While these studies have found progress in recent history, it is clear that barriers for graduate students still exist (Morin et al., 2016). Perhaps most significantly, doctoral programs generally focus on preparation for the structures and norms of academic life, especially disciplinary norms, without attention to the values of community engagement (Jaeger et al., 2014; O’Meara, 2008; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2016).

Responding to these challenges, one university redesigned a graduate certificate program in community engagement with an approach that attends to epistemic justice and transdisciplinary community building (Diaz et al., 2024). Another institution developed a competency-based graduate certification program to better equip students for community engagement in higher education (Doberneck et al., 2017).

In addition to the limitations of graduate student socialization traditions, doctoral students find themselves with a liminal positionality between student and faculty (Hubrig et al., 2017), which presents challenges with funding and sustainability (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2016) and nascent professional identities (O’Meara, 2008). During this time, doctoral students often cannot see themselves in community engagement (O’Meara, 2008; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2016). To support these future faculty, O’Meara (2008) offers a description of the knowledge, skills, and value orientations needed to become engaged scholars.

Jaeger et al. (2011) found that doctoral students’ perceptions of community-engaged research were highly influenced by the research methods, perspectives, and philosophical beliefs of their faculty advisers. Another study found that community-engaged doctoral research is more frequent at institutions recognized for a commitment to community engagement and more frequent in the fields of education and public health (Jaeger et al., 2014). Furthermore, community-engaged doctoral research typically employs one of several qualitative techniques with limited diversity in methodological approach (Jaeger et al., 2014).

In summary, the field of higher education has developed a deeper discussion of research methods based on recent journal publications, which connects them mostly to a more extensive debate about journal publication policies and what kind of research is needed. Contrastingly, in the field of community engagement, research methods have been part of broader reviews and have not provoked similar

discussions. Finally, studies focusing on doctoral research in the field of community engagement have concentrated mostly on the experiences of graduate students conducting engaged research. Their findings have sparked conversations about graduate students' struggles and how programs and faculty members can support engaged researchers.

The existing literature is limited regarding research methods used by graduate students researching community engagement not necessarily using engaged research methods. Therefore, our systematic review covers a mostly unexplored area, contributing to the knowledge base available to graduate students and emergent scholars researching community engagement. Investigating the role of doctoral students in researching community engagement may point to new opportunities to improve methodological approaches in the field and connect the conversation with the broader field of higher education.

## Methods

The primary purpose of this research is to describe how doctoral students have studied community engagement in dissertation research during the five-year period of 2018 through 2022. We conducted a systematic literature review (Callahan, 2014; Nightingale, 2009) on the research methods used in doctoral dissertations on higher education community engagement.

This study focused on doctoral research *on* community engagement and not on dissertations that used participatory or community-based research (i.e., engaged research or community-based research dissertations). Accordingly, the dissertations under review generally fell under the category of the scholarship of engagement (Sandmann, 2008), meaning that they analyzed community engagement theoretical frameworks, practices between community partners and researchers, and “universities’ efforts to address society’s most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems” (Boyer, 1996, p. 11). Engaged research dissertations refer to those scholars who work directly with community partners throughout the research process on community-identified problems. This section describes the decisions we made during the review process, organized into subsections of data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

### Data Collection

The data for this study were doctoral dissertation manuscripts, including Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs, identified in May 2023 in two phases. The first co-author conducted the initial search on the academic platform ProQuest, which contains 117 databases. In the second phase, he consulted two experts in the field to analyze and validate the first dataset and add dissertations that did not appear in the original search.

To identify the dissertations to include in the sample, the first co-author started with a search that included six terms in the titles of dissertations: *community engagement*, *public engagement*, *third mission*, *university engagement*, *engaged research*, and *engaged campus*.<sup>2</sup> He used two filters in the search: document type (dissertation/thesis) and dates (January 01, 2017, to December 31, 2022). A total of 211 dissertations and theses emerged in this first search. The two experts contributed four additional dissertations. One expert is an engaged scholar from Uruguay, and the other is a former Graduate Student Network (GradSN) Chair. They recommended dissertations based on graduate students who have reached out to them in the past and did not appear in our search results.

After the screening and eligibility process, 179 dissertations and theses were excluded. Five criteria were used in this process: eliminating duplicates, master theses, dissertations on community-engaged

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the inclusion of the terms “service-learning” or “civic engagement” would have enriched our review, they were excluded because of the limited time dedicated to data collection and data analysis. This is addressed in the limitation and future research sections.

projects in non-university contexts (for instance, community engagement in the Peace Corps), dissertations finished in 2017,<sup>3</sup> and dissertations that were in a language other than English and Spanish.

The initial search resulted in 215 dissertations and the final number of dissertations included in this study sample was 36 dissertations. Of those 36, 35 were in English and one was in Spanish.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis included both qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, the first co-author conducted qualitative content analysis for three sections of each dissertation: abstracts, introductions, and research methods. The content analysis considered seven predefined categories: research questions, disciplines and programs, research methodologies, research methods, data collection, sampling, and data analysis. Quotations from each dissertation were extracted and organized in a spreadsheet.

A second step included codifying these quotations into subcategories built inductively to generate descriptive statistics later. Codification consisted of an iterative process of abstraction and revision. In the spreadsheet, the first co-author added new columns, noting the frequency of each subcategory. This codification allowed the production of descriptive statistics of the analysis presented in other sections. The subcategories were not mutually exclusive. For instance, a dissertation could have used interviews and participant observation, two possible subcategories, for data collection.

The third step, where the four co-authors participated equally, was to identify the trends and gaps based on the descriptive statistics and our collective experience (summarized in the introduction) to identify ten common challenges. Particularly important to identifying the ten challenges was the 2023 IARSLCE Conference where the co-authors led a workshop discussing the descriptive statistics.

After defining those ten challenges, we conducted another qualitative content analysis of each dissertation's limitations and conclusions sections to identify how the authors of the dissertations addressed these challenges. Again, quotations were documented in a spreadsheet aligned with their corresponding challenges. Of those ten challenges, four rose to the top as core challenges because they were found most frequently and most prominently in doctoral students' reflective writing.<sup>4</sup>

## Findings

Our systematic review of dissertations revealed trends, gaps, and challenges in four central areas: research design, subjects and community, cross-cultural and global studies, and epistemologies and ontologies. This section begins with the topical and disciplinary focus areas of the dissertations, followed by those four central areas with the associated trends, gaps, and challenges described within each.

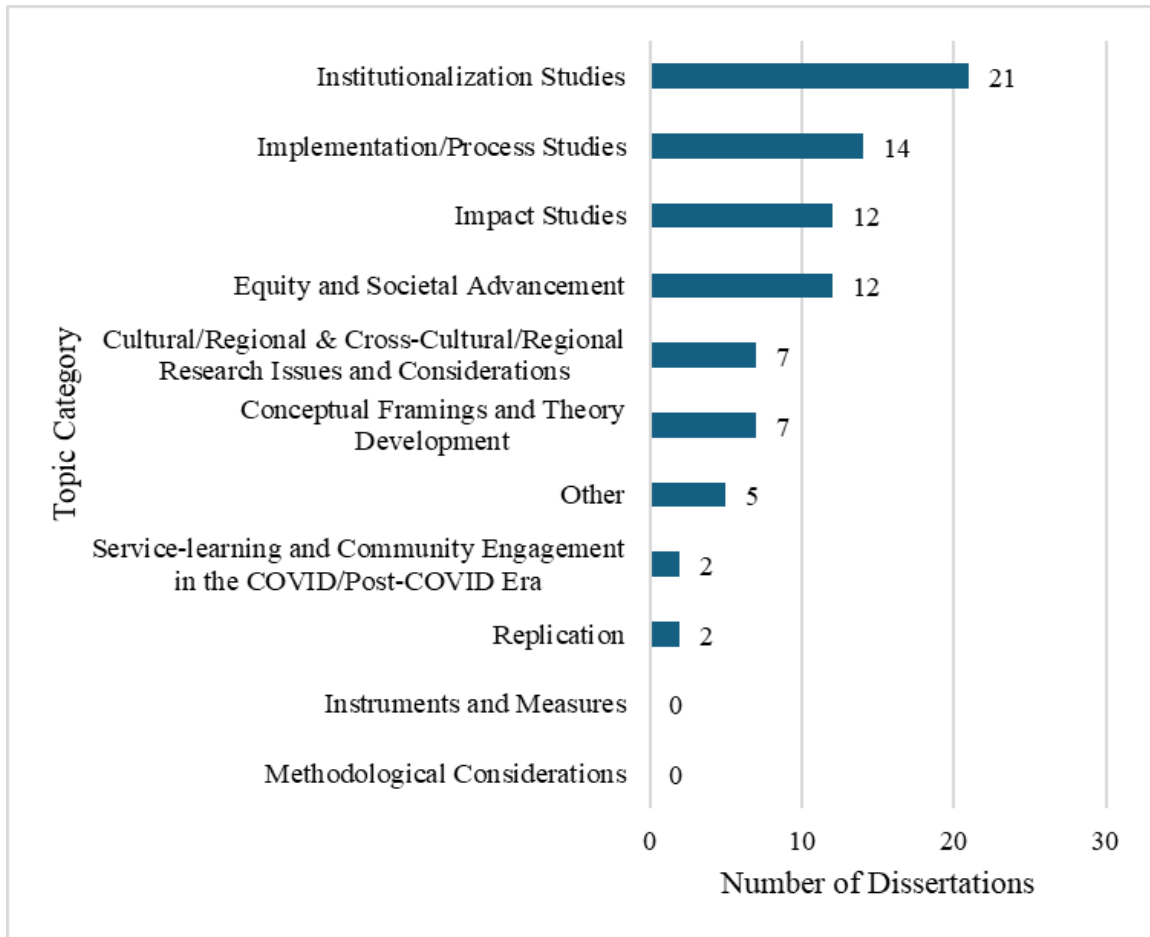
### Topics and Disciplines

The topical and disciplinary focus areas of the dissertations provide context for the overarching purposes of the research and of the disciplinary lenses that graduate researchers brought to their studies. The selected dissertations spanned a range of topics within the scholarship of engagement. Figure 1 illustrates this range by categorizing the dissertations using the Global Research Agenda classification schema developed by the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (2020).

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<sup>3</sup> The 2017 dissertations were excluded due to limited time for data collection and analysis, including an expert-recommended dissertation published that year.

<sup>4</sup> The challenges that were excluded were data analysis, theory, concepts, use of institutional datasets or sources, impact, and disciplines and interdisciplinarity. None of these challenges were addressed by more than six dissertations, except for the data analysis challenge, which was addressed in the research design challenge.

**Figure 1.***Dissertations Categorized by the IARSLCE Global Research Agenda Classification*

Of the 36 dissertations in the sample, over half were institutionalization studies with the rest spread between many of the other topics in the classification. None of the dissertations focused on instruments and measures or methodological considerations.

Analysis of the academic disciplines housing this doctoral work revealed that the overwhelming majority of scholarship on community engagement were developed in education departments as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.***Fields of Study Represented in Doctoral Dissertations 2018–2022*

Field of Study	Number of Dissertations
Education & Higher Education	28
Community, Organizational Leadership, & Development	3
Sociology	1
Geography & Urban Studies	1
Management	1
Health Sciences	1
Forest Resources and Conservation	1

Among the 36 dissertations reviewed, 28 were written from education departments and three were from a department called “Community, Organizational Leadership, and Local Development.” The remaining five authors were in sociology, geography and urban studies, management, health science, and forest resources and conservation.

The dissertations often used a study sample with interdisciplinary representation despite the student researchers predominantly coming from education departments. Some authors noted this as a limitation in their study. For example, Wangelin (2019) explained, “the demographic information about what discipline faculty are involved in and what types of skills participants feel are valuable to possess while working with service-learning could be added to collect data about faculty and staff backgrounds and focus areas” (p. 94). Wangelin’s (2019) reflection illustrates a commonly identified gap in the dissertations reviewed.

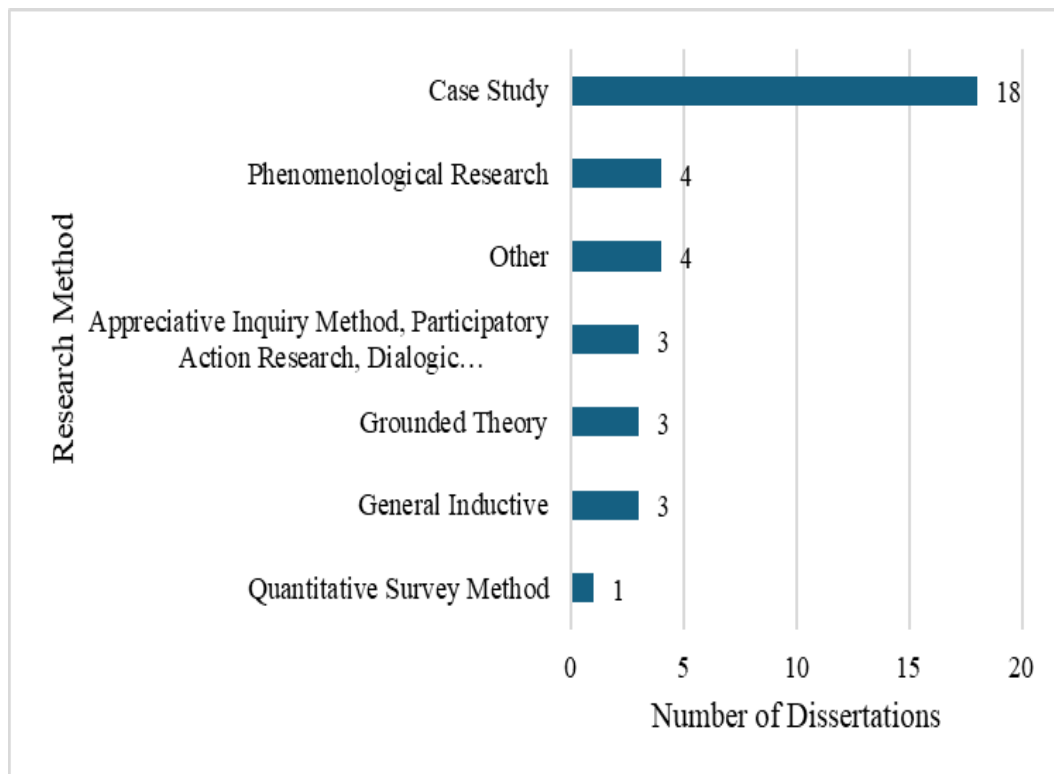
### Research Design

**Methodologies and methods.** Dissertation research that investigated community engagement commonly employed qualitative methodologies and case study methods. Among the 36 dissertations reviewed 31, or 86% used qualitative methodologies, only one utilized quantitative methodologies, and the remaining four used mixed methods approaches.

Looking more closely at their research design in Figure 2, 18 dissertations were case studies and the other 18 span a wide array of methods. This uneven distribution points to a gap in methodologies and methods used for dissertation research in the field.

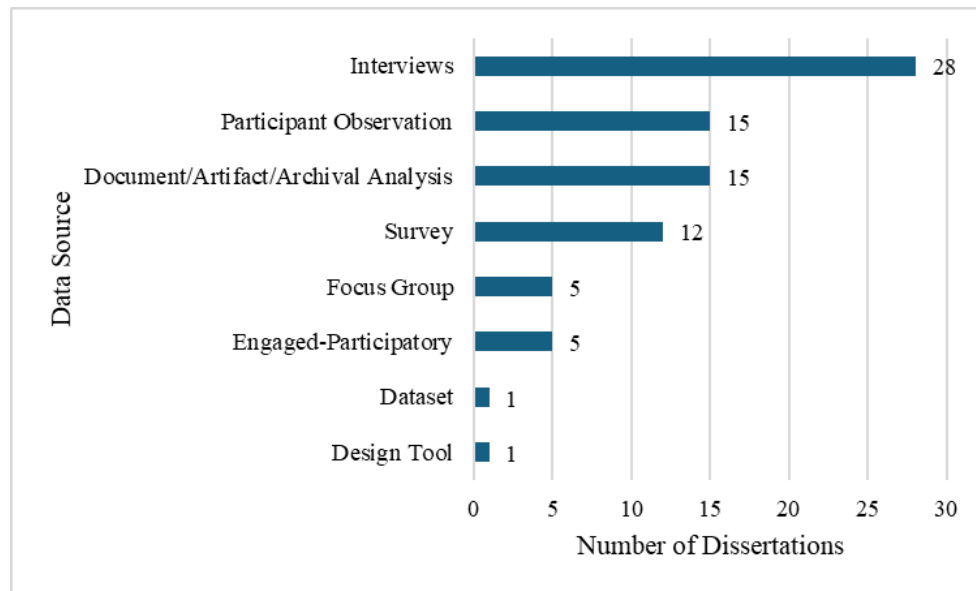
**Figure 2.**

*Research Methods Used in Community Engagement Doctoral Dissertations 2018–2022*



Within these research methods, a range of data sources were used by the student researchers, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.***Data Sources Used in Community Engagement Doctoral Dissertations 2018–2022*

Interviews were the primary data collection technique for the majority of researchers, followed by participant observation, document/artifact/archival analysis, and surveys. Less common methods included engaged or participatory techniques and focus groups, each used by five researchers. Only one researcher used an established dataset, and another employed an evaluation tool.

**Data analysis.** A significant number of dissertations failed to explicitly define their data analysis strategies, which makes direct comparisons challenging. However, there was a general consensus on the importance of qualitative analysis, as evidenced by the frequent use of methods such as coding, categorization, and thematization. Nevertheless, researchers employed 19 different strategies, including phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, inductive and deductive analysis, critical discourse analysis, and network analysis. Inductive methods, which involve examining data without strict theoretical frameworks, were particularly favored.

Some dissertations underscored the nuanced interplay between inductive and deductive approaches, enriching the discourse on data analysis methodologies. Monge Hernández (2021) highlighted this stating, “The use of inductive categorization criteria, for the open discovery of categories from the reading (without predefined categories), was complemented with the resources of the theoretical frame of reference (deductive)” (p. 219)<sup>5</sup>. Van Schyndel (2022) elaborates on the use of inductive analysis, explaining,

I use the initial Weidman et al., (2001) model as a useful conceptual framework and starting point for my study. However, as this research is an exploratory study and inductive (not deductive), it is not explicitly tied to this model in my data collection or analysis. (Van Schyndel, 2022, p.18)

Although there are exceptions, like Perrotti (2021), who effectively integrates theory into analysis, there remains a need for more theoretical grounding.

The potential for researcher bias was also mentioned frequently as a critical consideration in data analysis within the field. This is a common concern of qualitative researchers and many of the authors in this study had direct past experience with their study sites and/or participants. Insights from Evans (2020),

<sup>5</sup> Translated from Spanish by the first co-author.

Perrotti (2021), and Salomaa (2021) shed light on the complexities inherent in navigating one’s identity and biases throughout the analytical process. Evans (2020) discusses these complexities, stating,

The author’s dual roles of facilitator and researcher placed important limitations on the data collection strategies that were possible. As a facilitator of the public engagement project, the author was in a position of authority as a kind of instructor to the REU participants. This precluded the role of observer or participant observer where this study could take an ethnographic approach and collect data. (Evans, 2020, p. 291)

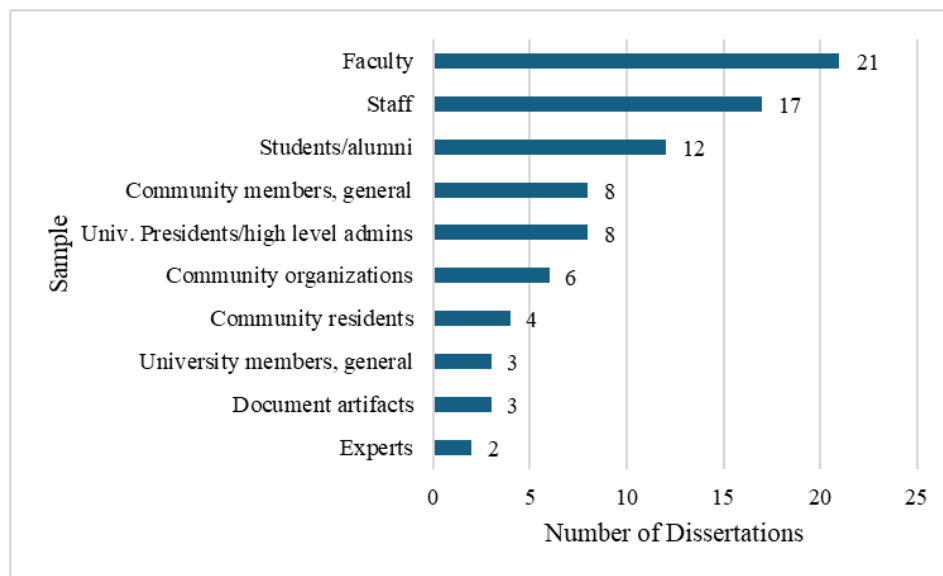
Perrotti (2021) reflects on his own identity biases, noting, “Inevitably, my identities of being a White heterosexual able-bodied cisgender male came with blind spots throughout this data analysis process” (p. 116). Salomaa (2021) adds to this discussion, highlighting the need to address biases, explaining “It forces the researcher to deal with his or her own influences on the study so that the shortcomings and biases of a ‘human instrument’ would not have an impact on the process” (p. 48). While data analysis in these dissertations offers diverse methods and insights, there remains room for greater theoretical engagement to enhance rigor and coherence.

### Subjects and Community

A notable trend in our analysis of the subjects and community stakeholders in dissertation research is the predominant focus on university members as shown in Figure 4, particularly faculty (21 cases) and staff (17 cases), as the primary study participants.

**Figure 4.**

*Subjects/Participants Used in Community Engagement Doctoral Dissertations 2018–2022*



Some dissertations (Cannon, 2022; Chamberlain, 2018; Dandoy, 2020; Dougnac, 2018; Grewell, 2019; Hall, 2018; Martin, 2021; Plaxton-Moore, 2021; Quan, 2021) incorporated significant community stakeholder participation into their research. Challenges in doing so were made evident in several dissertations. Studies by Plaxton-Moore (2021) and Quan (2021) highlighted the constraints of small sample sizes despite efforts to engage community organizations and individuals. Quan’s (2021), for instance, acknowledged a limitation that is similar to the challenge mentioned in the previous section: “Another limitation was that I did not collect data beyond the level of the community partner organization to include those directly impacted by the organization and the partnership” (Quan, 2021, p.189). This

admission underscored the necessity of gathering data beyond community partner organizations to encompass those directly affected by partnerships, emphasizing the importance of broader community engagement in research endeavors. Relatedly, Perrotti (2021) called attention to the lack of prior scholarship addressing community impact as he writes,

Even less attention has been devoted to understanding how these racial and economic realities impact the communities in which service learning occurs. In fact, there is an overall dearth of scholarship that aims to understand the experiences of communities involved in service learning. (Perrotti, 2021, p. 2)

Most doctoral dissertations aimed to broaden sampling and perspectives to foster inclusivity in research. However, as mentioned above, doctoral students face constraints within the limited duration of their doctoral programs. Chamberlain (2018) reflected on this reality, sharing,

From the data, it seemed there were other dimensions within the partnerships to explore, but the study was not designed to explore them in depth. Because I was not directly involved in the partnerships or had time to explore a more in-depth analysis of the various stakeholder groups and their connections to the project, additional research would help gain a deeper understanding. (Chamberlain, 2018, p.164)

Monge Hernández (2021) emphasized the importance of inclusivity by integrating the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in community engagement activities. Her research underscored the novelty and strength of incorporating diverse voices, a practice not commonly observed in studies associated with the capabilities approach. Similarly, Perrotti (2021) advocated for inclusivity by suggesting engagement with “third space” individuals—those often overlooked in traditional university-community partnerships, saying,

A future line of scholarship may take up ‘third spaces’ with whom campuses often do not work/partner (e.g., barber shops, cultural clubs, laundromats, markets, restaurants, etc.) to ask if residents are aware of the college’s community engagement work in the neighborhood; and, if so, how they feel about it and how they would describe it. (Perrotti, 2021, p.123)

Perrotti’s proposal to involve individuals from settings such as barber shops, cultural clubs, and markets aims to broaden the reach of initiatives and gather insights from a more diverse cross-section of the community.

## **Cross-Cultural and Global Studies**

While community engagement is developed in most parts of the world, most of the analyzed dissertations were written at U.S.-based institutions focusing on U.S.-based community engagement experiences. The United States was the site of research in 31 dissertations, with one each from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Finland, Myanmar, Namibia, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Some dissertations engaged in multisite work across nations.

The authors of several dissertations that explored cross-cultural research questions revealed unique challenges related to the additional burdens shouldered by scholars based outside of the Global North. First, non-U.S.-based research required additional contextualization of the cultural background. In these instances, doctoral students had to explain different university contexts and traditions, oppression structures on the level of the nation-state, perceptions of social justice, and even the influence of culture or religion.

Addressing cross-cultural and global dynamics required more energy and time because the current literature had limited references. Doctoral students in non-U.S. settings had to dedicate special time to tracing community engagement history and traditions, which, in some cases, led to predissertation publications. Dougnac (2018), for instance, two years before graduation, published an article filling this gap through an analysis of the concepts used in Spanish and English (*extensión universitaria, vinculación con el medio, public engagement, and community engagement*), which allowed them to “set the grounds

for further comparative studies” (p. 276). Studying works written in multiple languages presented an additional challenge.

The need to contextualize research in a site’s socio-historical context should apply to all studies, not just non-U.S. cases. Each country manifests internal cultural and sociopolitical differences, such as regional differences, rural-urban, and even colonial dynamics, that need to be identified. Vargas (2022), for example, studied community engagement programs at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) and claimed that,

The vulnerability of the archipelago due to its colonial relationship with the U.S.A. is evident. The UPR serving its communities through decoloniality approaches is a form of resistance that serves the interest of the local community and disrupts the export and servitude of Puerto Rico toward the U.S.A. (Vargas, 2022, p. 160–161)

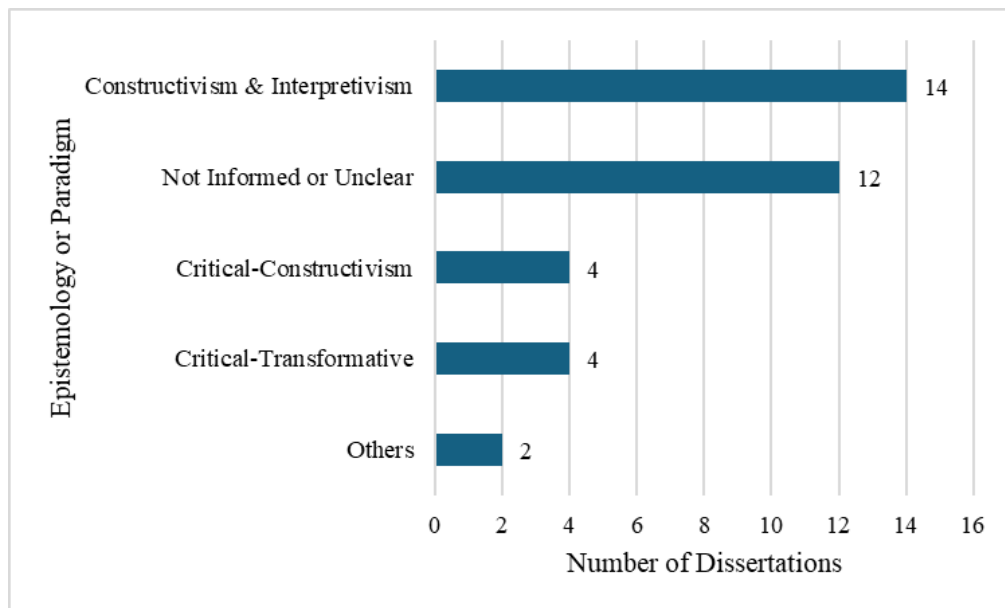
To deepen research on community engagement as a global field, some doctoral students suggested replicating case studies in other countries and promoting comparative studies between different or similar contexts and university traditions. Despite these suggestions, the dissertations in this study were dominated by research in the United States. The gap in cross-cultural and global studies can be explained, in part, by the challenges identified by the dissertation authors.

### Epistemologies and Ontologies

Research methods and researchers operate under certain epistemological and ontological assumptions, even if they are unclear about them or not explicit in their assumptions. In the context of this research, we define epistemologies as the set of assumptions and theories about what knowledge and knowledge production are and ontologies as assumptions and theories related to the nature of reality and existence (Jones et al., 2022). Figure 5 shows that 14 of the dissertation projects in this study followed traditional constructivist or interpretivist epistemologies, while 12 were unclear or did not inform the reader or problematize their positionality.

**Figure 5.**

*Epistemological Perspectives in Community Engagement Doctoral Dissertations 2018–2022*



Some dissertation authors argued that the scholarship on community engagement should attend to the way universities reproduce traditional epistemologies and ontologies in their committees, exams, and

promotion and tenure policies (Quan, 2021; Vargas, 2022). Likewise, doctoral students should address these power dynamics by identifying how their research contributes to disrupting the traditional ways of the university, especially for the studies focused on engaged research experiences that are promoting those changes. Plaxton-Moore (2021), for instance, argues that “creating policies that value and compensate community-situated epistemologies in the academy is another necessary disruption to transform institutions to be more accountable to their public purpose” (p. 72).

While there is a growing amount of community stakeholders who participate in research processes, these studies are often focused around evaluating university-community partnerships rather than engaged research that seeks to address and impact community-identified and community-situated social issues. In response to this challenge, four dissertation authors aligned with critical or transformative approaches where the community becomes coresearchers and the need for social change gains value. Others connected interpretivism and critical epistemologies through critical constructivism, critical feminism, intersectionality, and decoloniality perspectives. Both strategies are explicit in their goal of social and institutional transformation and how researchers should be aware of their interests, ideologies, and worldviews. For instance, Crossland (2020) claims that “At its core, critical constructivism seeks to confront hegemonic structures through empowering subjugated knowledge” (p. 116). Further, Crossland (2020) provides an example, noting,

I intentionally crafted one of those articles in collaboration with community college student leaders and an emerging practitioner-scholar, Angélica, to leverage this opportunity and challenge the notion of who can produce scholarly work. This should not be an anomaly or even noteworthy. (Crossland, 2020, p. 203)

Similarly, Dandoy (2020) employed an appreciative inquiry method, stating, “The CEPs themselves are active participants in the data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. As co-researchers in this process, knowledge is not articulated to them, but as part of a conversation with them” (p. 52).

The review of dissertations in this study highlighted several common epistemological and ontological perspectives and the significant impact of those perspectives on the research and on the field more broadly. Twelve of the 36 dissertations lacked clarity around the researcher’s epistemological and ontological stance, pointing to potential challenges that should be addressed.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis of five years of doctoral student dissertation research on community engagement revealed several meaningful conclusions in light of the existing literature in the field of higher education and community engagement. They included the trends of qualitative methodologies and common disciplinary origins, the lack of community voice in research, the centering of United States research settings, and the need for epistemological awareness and diversity.

The field of higher education has been debating the trends in research methods for many years, whereas the field of community engagement in higher education is newer to the conversation. While quantitative research, particularly advanced statistics, has been privileged in top journals in the higher education field (Wells et al., 2015), our data revealed a different tendency, where 86% of doctoral dissertations used qualitative methodologies. This finding is consistent with reviews of research in the community engagement field that found abundant qualitative case-based studies and a relative absence of quantitative research (Jaeger et al., 2014; Sandmann et al., 2016).

While qualitative research contributes important insights to the literature, the dissertation authors reflected that, like any methodology, it has shortcomings. The dissertation authors examined for this study consistently named challenges related to qualitative research design. These included potential for researcher bias, participant bias, limited generalizability, and time constraints, among others. For example, Dougnac (2018) explained, “. . . a quantitative study would complement the results of this research, as the possibility of reaching a bigger number of participants and a different kind of data collection method may lead to the emergence of issues that were not visible during the qualitative research” (p. 282). Another researcher wrote

about the challenge of generalization, sharing, “the group of respondents was very small with only three respondents per group and therefore limits generalizability of the findings” (DiMaggio, 2020, p. 111).

The abundance of qualitative research is not a problem by itself. While the dissertation authors refer to these challenges as limitations of their studies, they are characteristics of any qualitative research. Still, this trend needs to be discussed broadly in our field in light of other trends in the broader field of higher education. For instance, this qualitative-dominant trend could be explained by the difficulties of accessing, or the non-existence or the non-reliability of datasets on community engagement as a newer field of study. Another reason could be the limited time the doctoral students have to conduct their dissertation research. The authors acknowledged that data and results may have been richer with more time available, and it may have limited the perspectives and scope of the research and contributions.

The reliance on the Education discipline was another compelling theme in the reviewed dissertations, raising questions about how much disciplinary programs determine the kind of research produced. If doctoral programs generally focus on preparation for the structures and disciplinary norms of academic life in the field of community engagement (Jaeger et al., 2014; O’Meara, 2008; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2016), we could hypothesize that this trend could explain the lack of diversity in dissertation research. While education departments are a natural fit for graduate students studying the scholarship of engagement, dissertations will be grounded in their disciplinary norms, traditions, and cultures, limiting the transdisciplinary perspectives that are so highly valued in the field. Therefore, there is room for greater diversification of perspectives through engaging graduate students from other departments and giving strong attention to the disciplinary backgrounds of study participants in dissertation research.

Another interpretation for these methodological and disciplinary trends could be due to the emergent character of the community engagement field compared to the field of higher education more broadly. As community engagement is located on the borders of higher education while expanding those same borders, there may be a need for qualitative methods to explore and describe innovative changes in institutions and their subjectivities.

This interpretation, however, found its limitations when we observed how most of this research concentrates on internal actors in the university. Is it possible to understand the phenomenon of community engagement without considering the voices of community members? We are not trying to make a moral critique on this issue because our own experiences in our dissertation research did not include community members. Still, based on the data collected and a broader perspective on the field, we observe a clear paradox. While the principles of community engagement consider the inclusion of other voices, stories, and interests in scholarship (Community Based Research Collaborative, 2021), most of the reviewed dissertations do not integrate them. If this is something that each doctoral student cannot afford because of time and resource limitations, as some literature suggests (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2016), how can the field, as a collective, contribute to addressing this challenge?

We agree that research focused on internal campus stakeholders at higher education institutions provides valuable insights for fostering and embedding community engagement in educational contexts. However, the relative lack of constituencies external to universities in research unintentionally marginalizes the perspectives and contributions of community members and organizations. To this end, when examining the role of communities in research, two significant challenges emerge: insufficient community involvement and the presumption of complete detachment between researchers and the community.

Consideration of the subjects and communities of doctoral research remains critical to expand the scope of the research in this field to fully incorporate the voices, experiences, and expertise of community stakeholders. By embracing a more inclusive approach, researchers can foster more equity and inclusivity in their research practices, leading to more comprehensive and impactful outcomes. However, this could be in contradiction with the strict timeline of a dissertation already mentioned.

The concentration of dissertations from the United States also underscores the need for a broader scope of understanding of “community” in the field. The cross-cultural and global studies findings illustrate how research in non-U.S. settings requires additional time and energy in analyzing context and local traditions, describing their communities in a deeper way, and making efforts to understand existing power dynamics. Despite the additional effort, this analysis of cultural and sociopolitical contexts is an important part of any

dissertation that should not be reserved for those outside the United States. Integrating this exercise as standard practice would begin to expand the scope of the field rather than centering research from the United States, paralleling other equity efforts like analyzing race and gender dynamics in community engagement.

These findings relate to the epistemological and ontological challenges identified in our review. Many student researchers described an interpretivist or constructivist way of knowing, while one-third of dissertation authors did not identify their epistemological assumptions. This leaves questions in the research as these assumptions, in large part, inform the research design and help to identify the researcher's positionality. If doctoral students' perceptions are highly influenced by the methods, perspectives, and philosophical beliefs of their faculty advisers (Jaeger et al., 2011), then questions arise about the socialization and preparation practices in doctoral programs.

Much like the field of higher education, which is looking critically at knowledge production systems, our field should question how academic legacies and traditional ways of being scholars influence research methods and limit epistemological diversity. We need to make a habit of problematizing how our own biases and contributions promote or reproduce certain ways of conducting research and structural inequities.

The lack of diversity in research designs and worldviews among the dissertations reviewed is consistent with the greater body of research in the field of community engagement. More opportunities to expand the socialization and preparation of emerging scholars are needed. Moving away from the reproduction of traditional approaches to research with stronger, more diverse support for dissertation research will lead to greater contributions to our growing field.

## **Recommendations**

This study has yielded several general and specialized recommendations for our field. While primarily aimed at graduate students, we believe that these recommendations provide insights beneficial to emergent scholars in the field more broadly. First, we encourage the creation of an open-access dissertation repository that would allow graduate students and other researchers to easily access and reference emergent scholarship on community engagement, including dissertations featuring “trendbreaking” approaches. Second, we invite more formalized supports for graduate students through institutions and professional networks, including recognition for scholars confronting the entrenched challenges of the field. Finally, we advise a wider and more robust embrace of the global network of researchers studying community engagement.

Regarding research design, we encourage scholars to use their research questions to articulate their methods in their community engagement scholarship, which may raise the visibility of engaged research in the field. Collaborative research may lower the barriers for graduate students, in particular, to pursue studies on community engagement. We advise institutions to revise protocols to allow open dataset access and to educate their Institutional Review Boards about engaged research that involves community constituencies.

Considerations around subjects and community are crucial to the advancement of research on community engagement and to outcomes inclusive of community stakeholders. We encourage early-career scholars and their faculty mentors to build and maintain long-term relationships with community constituencies and consider inviting community members into the research process. On a global level, the field of higher education community engagement and its networks and associations should facilitate inclusive participation of international researchers, particularly those from the Global South, with funding and opportunities for collaborative and comparative studies. The Global Research Agenda of the IARSLCE provides a strong framework for benchmarking global inclusivity in the field.

Openness to non-traditional epistemologies and ontologies is a recommendation interwoven with all categories named above. Replication of historical hierarchies of power between higher education institutions and communities may be fortified without attention to reward mechanisms within universities and barriers to conducting research with community-based input and outcomes. Doctoral students, and all researchers, should include a positionality statement in academic work and integrate reflexive practices into their research processes.

As members of the GradSN of IARSLCE, we intend to organize and promote training around research methods for graduate students and faculty, pursue an expanded mentoring program with a focus on engaged research supports, encourage “trendbreaking” doctoral graduates to present their dissertations through the Dissertation Dish program and to advocate for the advancement of the Global Research Agenda within the IARSLCE network. Furthermore, we acknowledge the value of the Dissertation Overview section of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* as a useful resource.

## **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this research is that the review cannot be compared or generalized to the totality of the field, as it refers only to doctoral research. Some of these trends and gaps can only be representative of the specific conditions of leading a doctoral project (limited time, limited funding, and early-career stages). In addition, results refer only to those dissertations included in our sample, while other trends may appear as more terms (particularly service-learning and civic engagement), datasets, or other languages are added.

## **Conclusion**

Between 2018 and 2022, doctoral dissertations on community engagement were framed mostly on qualitative methodologies and case study methods and centered voices of university actors. Quantitative methodologies and community-based research methods were the minority. Most of the research was set in U.S. institutions, and doctoral students often failed to address epistemological and ontological issues. This poses four main challenges for the next generation of scholars including rethinking research designs, expanding subjects and participants, promoting cross-cultural and global studies, and revisiting epistemological and ontological stances.

This review is an invitation to learn from doctoral research to open a broader discussion in the field around research methods and connect questions from *how* we are studying community engagement to *why* we are studying community engagement. The state of research methods in doctoral research is telling of the kind of questions that have been a part of the conversation, and which questions have been excluded. This study contributes to defining the space for new graduate students in the field and faculty advisers guiding the next generation of scholars.

Research on graduate student experiences in the field of higher education community engagement has not been fully developed, limiting the awareness of graduate students’ unique needs and challenges. Understanding the trends, gaps, and challenges in doctoral dissertations begins to address this gap. Further, identifying opportunities to support graduate students and their advisers so they may fill the gaps and overcome the challenges, may strengthen the value of dissertation research in the broader field of higher education community engagement.

## **Future research**

Future research could expand on this work in many ways. Conducting a similar dissertation review with the search terms of service-learning and civic engagement could yield a wealth of data around trends, gaps, and challenges in the field, considering their specific attention to student learning and democratic values. Datasets beyond ProQuest could offer a wider selection of doctoral research, as would analyses of dissertations in languages other than English. Future studies should aim to address intersectionality, longitudinal impacts, diverse institutional contexts, and detailed examinations of power dynamics. Other studies can also replicate this systematic literature review with doctoral engaged, or community-based, research dissertations. Additionally, future studies could explore the influence of the type of doctoral programs, such as Ed.D versus Ph.D, the predominance of case studies, and the structures and tools offered by specific universities and programs in their doctoral training. It is crucial to address these themes through inclusive and reflective research practices to advance community engagement and enhance the societal impact of higher education institutions.



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## Appendix

The full list of dissertations included in the review can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PKwRfkeDXTSwFmTCFTYhJcBAk7aLimPrq6VTtrkqQ8/edit?usp=sharing>

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