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Community-Engaged Research Cafecitos and the Knowledge They Bring to Campus

11/30/2021

By Kayla Fettig

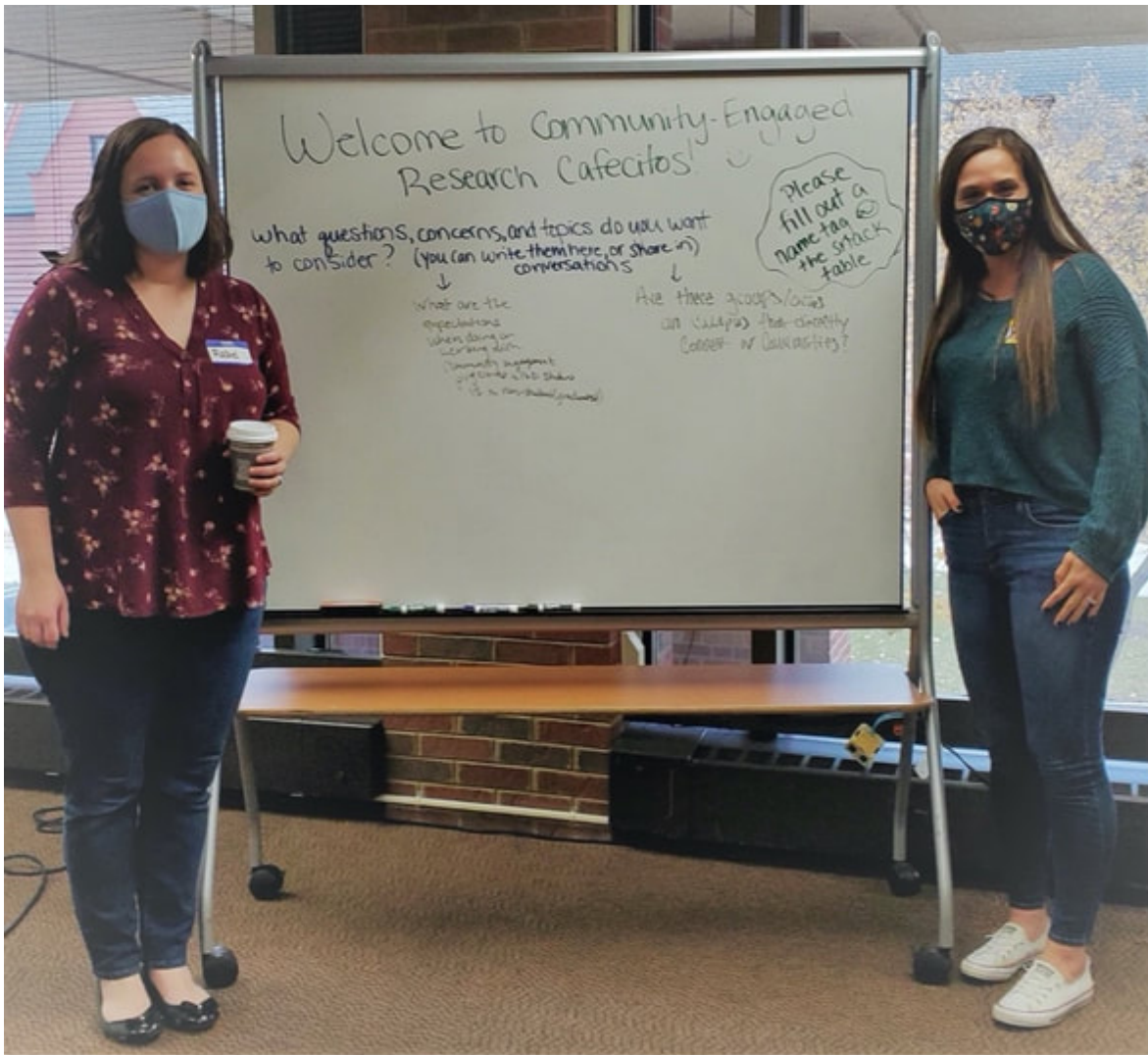
Over the past several years, UW-Milwaukee's Rhetoric and Composition program has shifted its focus to include community-engaged research. [Dr. Rachel Bloom-Pojar](#), who helped revamp the program said, "This came as the result of a combination of the previous plans in Rhetoric and Composition and Technical and Professional Communication with a year-long process of re-envisioning what our PhD program could do to reflect student interests and our local context." Thus, [the Public Rhetoric and Community Engagement program](#) was born to support students that wanted to remain in academia as well as those that wanted to explore their options outside of academia once they obtained their doctoral degrees.

As a newly admitted student into the Public Rhetoric and Community Engagement PhD program, I was excited to see how thriving the program within the English department had become. I had a creative writing background but had always been interested in the non-profit sector and was drawn to the program after its revamping. I quickly saw that the program allowed students the opportunity to work side-by-side with faculty on community-engaged research, something I wanted to be a part of while still being able to opt into traditional rhetoric and composition classes.

Within the first few weeks I immersed myself into what the program had to offer, and quickly learned about the Cafecito series being held on campus. The Cafecitos project is a Community-Engaged Research "coffee hour" hosted monthly by Dr. Rachel Bloom-Pojar and third-year Ph.D student [Danielle Koepke](#). These monthly Cafecitos give graduate students across all disciplines the opportunity to discuss what community-engaged research is all about, how it can be done, and what it looks like to collaborate with students and faculty already engaged in it.

When talking to Danielle about the Cafecitos and what inspired her and Rachel to invite graduate students to learn more about community-engaged research she said, "Dr. Bloom-Pojar and I are hosting Community-Engaged Research Cafecitos (coffee hours) because we believe that building relationships is the core of everything we do as scholars, as researchers, and as people. We want to make space for graduate students in the humanities to share experiences, questions, and concerns regarding doing work with communities. We believe the best way to do that is not through lectures but through informal conversations over food and coffee."

The first Cafecito was held on October 13th and focused on "Community-Engaged Research in Covid Times." The most recent Cafecito, "Making Connections Outside of the Academy," took place on November 10th explored what it looks like to do community-engaged research and



Dr. Rachel Bloom-Pojar (left) and Ph.D. student Danielle Koepke (right) in front of the Cafecito whiteboard discussion questions. Photo by Kayla Fettig.

how to begin making those community connections. The conversations that arose from the second Cafecito included:

- "How do you make those connections with organizations?"
- "How do you do ethical research within those communities?"
- "What happens when you don't hear anything back from an organization?"
- "What are organizations asking from students that want to contribute to their organization or do research?"

These discussions are part of the core purpose of the Cafecitos as many times students don't know what community-engaged research is, how to make the connections, or often understand how messy the process is. One of the goals with the Cafecitos is to start building community

with the attendees through discussion, guidance, and personal reflection from Danielle and Rachel. The coffee and snacks help too, but the discussions are intimate and reflect the knowledge Danielle and Rachel share.

Danielle expressed her passion surrounding the Cafecitos saying, “The goal is to foster connections across disciplines that may lead to sharing resources, support, and information as well as building a network of relations for potential research work, collaborations, or job opportunities, in the future.” Danielle continued, “As graduate students in the humanities are increasingly considering research that engages with communities, we hope to offer a space where we all can grapple with the ethical negotiations that come with that. We hope to draw in graduate students across disciplines because we have much we can learn from one another, and also much we can understand about one another. Cafecitos are a great space to share experiences and hear what others are doing in their research, writing, and work within and outside of academia.”

The Cafecitos’ goals are clear: all are invited to collaborate, discuss, and question what community-engaged research looks like and how to do it. Danielle and Rachel’s attention to detail and excitement surrounding each Cafecitos’ theme is infectious. They carefully dedicate time and space to the students’ questions surrounding how to network, how to do ethical research, and how to get involved in research that communities or organizations need. Rachel confirms that these questions are important as often graduate students do not know where to start when it comes to community-engaged research and building those relationships. Hopefully, the Cafecitos can help answer those questions for students.

Rachel and Danielle have also been invited by the UWM Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) graduate chapter to continue their community-engagement conversations with a special virtual

event focused on

“Creating Space for the Public Work of Rhetoric as Graduate Students”.

This virtual event is on Friday, December 3rd from 1-2 pm and does require advance registration (as detailed below). The goal of this sponsored event is to, “share the process of putting rhetoric to work with community writers and offer suggestions for how graduate students can foster connections

Creating Space for the Public Work of Rhetoric as Graduate Students



Please join UW-Milwaukee’s graduate student chapter of Rhetoric Society of America on Friday December 3rd from 1-2 pm for our Fall 2021 event on Friday December 3rd!

Partial flyer for the RSA-sponsored community-engagement event. Flyer provided by Gitte Frandsen and Kristin Wagel, co-chairs of the RSA.

between their academic interests and meaningful work in the world.”

In collaboration with the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) and the Center for Community-Based Learning Leadership and Research (CBLLR), Rachel and Danielle plan to continue creating space and support for graduate students interested in community engaged research in the spring semester. If you are interested in attending the RSA-sponsored event on December 3rd, it is strongly encouraged to RSVP through [this linked Google form](#) to receive the virtual meeting invite on December 2nd. I know my attendance in the Cafecitos has been enlightening and I look forward to the others that are coming, I hope to see you there for the future ones as well.