

*The Graduate Experience at the Center:  
Remaking Education and Research*

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At the Center for Race and Ethnicity, graduate education and research is a model of interdisciplinarity. CRE Graduate Assistants come from various disciplines: Sociology, History, Media and Journalism Studies, Political Science, English, and other social sciences and humanities disciplines across the university. Not only are they intimately involved in the Center's programming, roundtables, conferences, course development, teaching, and intellectual life, but they also find a productive space at the CRE to work alongside faculty to advance their dissertation chapters, articles, research proposals, and professional careers. Below, in their own words, they describe what they've learned from sharing their research and writing at the Center's weekly work sessions. Their collective insights testify to how the Center's interdisciplinary model of graduate research is pushing the boundaries on innovative education—*Keith Wailoo, Director*

**A New Cross-Disciplinary Model of Graduate Education and Intellectual Community**

"When I began the 08-09 year as a graduate assistant at the Center for Race and Ethnicity I had completed my qualifying exams, was struggling to finish my dissertation proposal and was feeling stuck and generally unsure. As I approach the end of the year I find I am revitalized. I have completed my dissertation proposal and have won a university wide dissertation fellowship, but most importantly I have a much clearer perspective on what I would like to accomplish intellectually and professionally. The positive shift I have experienced at this critical moment in my graduate career is rooted directly in the experiences I have had as a GA at the CRE." — **Isra Ali, Media and Journalism Studies**

The graduate assistants at the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity play central roles in the intellectual life of the Center. The GA position fosters productivity and develops intellectual community; encourages professional development through weekly research group meetings; involves students in cross-disciplinary scholarship and all dimensions of the Center's programming. Below are

additional GA reflections on what the year-long affiliation at the Center has meant for students across disciplines, departments, and schools.

**PRODUCTIVITY AND INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY: THE WEEKLY RESEARCH GROUP**

"Our weekly staff meetings and work sessions have been invaluable for demystifying dissertations, the job market and the process of professionalization. GA's and CRE directors talk openly about their work and often circulate writing in progress--from fellowship applications to job letters to dissertation chapters. Seeing others' projects on a regular basis, and knowing that they're supportive of mine, has helped me sustain interest and excitement about my research, and benefit from really constructive feedback." — **Anantha Sudhakar, English**

"After exams many of us PhD students go off into a cave, which is not good -- no matter who you are; and the CRE gave me the intellectual and physical space needed to connect with others who are going through similar experiences. The GA

Appointment is a great opportunity to learn from the faculty directors and other graduate students." — **Dana Brown, Political Science**

"I was able to share my writing--everything from grant proposals to dissertation chapters and publication pieces--with this amazing group of gifted and insightful graduate students and faculty. I learned a lot from faculty who shared their experiences about the writing process and gave us a bunch of useful information/tips about the job market and about how to prepare for the life of a junior professor. Finally, these weekly meetings were also just refreshing—supplying much-needed humor, goodwill, and camaraderie to my daily life in grad school." — **Shakti Jaising, English**

"Our weekly work sessions have been incredibly beneficial for a number of reasons – First, I got to see other graduate students' and faculty's abstracts, papers, funding applications, proposals, dissertation chapters and book chapters and this has been invaluable for learning how to better evaluate my own work and for making comparisons about my own progress. Secondly, I found a group of individuals

## The Graduate Experience at the Center for Race and Ethnicity

### A New Cross-Disciplinary Model of Graduate Education and Intellectual Community

- How to approach the dissertation stage of graduate school
- How to embrace the writing process
- How to prepare for the job market



CRE Graduate Assistants at our very first Fall 2009 event  
L-R: Bridget Gurtler (History), Isra Ali (Media Studies), Dana Brown (Political Science), Fatimah Williams-Castro (Anthropology)



L-R: Keith Wailoo (Director), Mia Bay (Associate Director), Mia Kissil (Senior Program Coordinator)

that I trust and respect to give thoughtful and constructive feedback, which has facilitated my ability to articulate what I want my project to be and what is interesting about my project. And lastly, finding that in the right situation it is ok to circulate work that is in progress has allowed me to develop some critical distance from my writing so I focus less on my insecurities and more on how to improve my writing so that with whatever I am working on I accomplish what I set out to accomplish.” – **Isra Ali, Media and Journalism Studies**

“Through the work sessions I was able to get a better understanding of a whole range of academic activities – from writing a course paper, dissertation proposal, handling research material, struggling with dissertation chapters, to designing a course, compiling an edited book, serving on committees and grant boards, being on a job market, and so on. I feel much more informed and prepared to plan my academic career, to decide what kind of activities to concentrate on and what would and would not work for me. Seeing so many works in progress in different phases of development, in different stages of careers encouraged me to be able to share works in progress myself and to look at writing as a group process, not a solitary activity.” -- **Dora Vargha, History/Excellence Fellow, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research**

“Weekly staff meetings are also an opportunity for us to discuss our ongoing projects and extracurricular activities, and most importantly to circulate our work and receive and give feedback. The constructive, rigorous, and collegial atmosphere provided a fruitful space to present my work, including early, unpolished drafts. During my tenure at the Center, I drafted dissertation chapters, conference abstracts, an article for publication, and funding proposals. Discussions with my fellow

GAs and the faculty advisors helped me to find clarity in my ideas and to advance my analysis during various stages of these projects. Perhaps unique to the Center and our working group is that not only do GAs circulate work in progress, but the faculty directors also share their writing for feedback.” – **Fatimah Williams-Castro, Anthropology**

“While, much time in graduate school is necessarily spent in solitude-- reading, researching, or sitting in front of a computer-- the collegial atmosphere of the center countered the alienating feelings that often accompany graduate studies. The center provides a place to deal with our own academic problems and to learn from the problems and successes of others. The center represents what I believe grad school should ideally be like.” – **Jeffrey Dowd, Sociology**

### WRITING, PUBLISHING, EDITING, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“The CRE has really helped with my professional development. The Director and Co-Director have been frank with all of us Graduate Assistants about publishing, writing, editing, and the job market to name a few. You get to ask all of the questions you want answers to without ever feeling embarrassed.” – **Dana Brown, Political Science**

“Prior to the CRE, good writing had seemed to be something that we would just pick up from reading, be gifted (or not) with, or gain somewhere along the way. The collaborative work and editing projects I had the opportunity to be involved in at the CRE have given me new perspectives on writing as well as improved my editing and writing skills. I have seen from start to finish how an edited volume can emerge from a good idea or a conference, and how to manage that process. We have discussed in our weekly groups when to use different

narrative styles, how to create strong arguments and clear prose, how to balance chapters within a volume, as well as how to effectively reach out to a variety of different audiences while still maintaining one’s own disciplinary perspective. Having explicit conversations about the art of writing was incredibly useful and filled a gap for me. I feel more prepared to deal with the challenges of dissertation research and writing, navigate different dissertation committee members working styles, and many other different methods for staying productive and on track in the process of completing a PhD. In addition, I have learned how to prepare for conferences, write grant proposals, and how to position myself as a new scholar. These skills have had very tangible effects on my graduate experience and played a large part in my success in creating applications to various fellowships, conferences and grants this year.” – **Bridget Gurtler, History**

“The Center provided me with ‘contextualized professionalization.’ While, most seminars or presentations about professional skills present ideal cases along with a few anecdotes or frequent problems, at the Center, we engaged with actual problems contextualized into academic life. We discussed not simply time-management but how to integrate various workloads (e.g. teaching and research).” – **Jeffrey Dowd, Sociology**

“I found sharing abstracts in a cross disciplinary environment especially useful, since it is a very concise text through which you have to be able to communicate your ideas, and make it clear and easy to understand for readers coming from various disciplines. Getting feedback from outside my discipline allows me to avoid jargon and to be very precise in my phrasing. The work sessions of the CRE helped me to write several

## Graduate Assistants 2008-09



*Isra Ali, Media and Journalism Studies*



*Dana Brown, Political Science*



*Jeff Dowd, Sociology*



*Bridget Gurtler, History*

successful abstracts for international conferences.” -- **Dora Vargha, History/Excellence Fellow, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research**

### FOSTERING RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS ACROSS DEPARTMENTS, SCHOOLS, DISCIPLINES: THE CENTER'S PROGRAM

“Working alongside faculty directors and organizing center events exposed me to academic, university, and publishing structures. Keith and Mia shared with us their experiences with and expertise in publishing books and articles, applying for national grants, evaluating grant applications, and leading academic hiring processes—all valuable knowledge for the professional development of up and coming scholars. I will end my tenure at the CRE more knowledgeable and empowered as I complete the final stages of my doctorate, enter the academic job market, and join the faculty of a research university.” – **Fatimah Williams-Castro, Anthropology**

“At roundtables and forums, I have been exposed to arguments and methodologies about race in a wide range of disciplines—from the humanities to the sciences. I think this exposure is a rare opportunity in grad school, where students are often in conversation only with specialists in their area of concentration, or with those in their own field. Knowing how a diverse group of scholars think and write is really useful for those of us doing interdisciplinary work. It reminds us that interdisciplinary scholarship is not simply about incorporating other concepts and methodologies in our work, but also about creating a wider community of scholars who engage with each other in a meaningful and sustained way.” – **Anantha Sudhakar, English**

“The CRE’s Faculty Forums were extremely eye opening and intellectually stimulating. Seeing faculty come together at various stages in their projects helped me understand that research, whether you are a graduate student or a faculty member, is still a lot like making sausage – it isn’t pretty no matter who you are. It was reassuring to say the least.” – **Dana Brown, Political Science**

“The strong interdisciplinary mission and dialogues created at the CRE have provided me with a model that I will use throughout my academic career as a way in which to build meaningful and generative bridges across disciplines in order to raise new questions about big problems--like the usefulness and meaning of diversity, how DNA and race are mutually constructed within various cultural and scientific frameworks, etc.” – **Bridget Gurtler, History**

“In terms of practical experience, I learned how to organize conferences, roundtables, and talks-- all of which showed me the value of building and growing a community with scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Attending the CRE events meant being exposed to ideas, areas of research, and disciplinary perspectives that I would never ordinarily have had a chance to engage with. Also, writing and editing newsletters about these events was a really creative, analytical exercise and collaborative project that I enjoyed.” – **Shakti Jaising, English.**

“Taking part in organizing panels, conferences, writing newsletters and commenting on a diverse range of work by others brought questions and problems into my view that greatly enriches my work and my studies. Overall, being a GA became a central part of my graduate experience, at once a safe place to try out new ideas, and also a venue where I could always count on meaningful comments and

help with my work.” -- **Dora Vargha, History/Excellence Fellow, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research**

“Leaving the CRE, I find that I have a lot to show for my time here. Besides the concrete skills I have acquired like editing manuscripts or organizing conferences or writing successful funding applications, I have connected with graduate students from other departments which has resulted in fruitful intellectual and social relationships that I value greatly.” – **Isra Ali, Media and Journalism Studies**

“I have found the weekly meetings at the CRE to be a place where I feel comfortable to express my ideas and work at various stages, have found new friendships, and a valuable collective experience that reminds me of the end result and goal of the graduate experience--the honor and ability to participate in a liberal, creative, community that provides new ways of seeing and interpreting the world and our place in it.” – **Bridget Gurtler, History**

“Not only have I gained valuable insight from the diverse set of viewpoints which the interdisciplinary set up the center provides, but also I have benefited from reviewing others’ papers. The practice of reviewing other papers has allowed me to hone the critical eye required to revise my own unwieldy and unfocused early drafts. I feel that the set up at the center was crucial to getting my paper into shape in order to fulfill my last pre-dissertation degree requirement.” – **Jeffrey Dowd, Sociology**

### TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES

“I have stretched my technical abilities during my time at the CRE and learned new software programs to manage the center’s website and to create a blog for the Obama project, I enjoyed working with visual materials and layouts (something in my sometimes text-heavy discipline I have

## Graduate Assistants 2008-09 cont.



*Shakti Jaising, English*



*Anantha Sudhakar, English*



*Dora Vargha, History/Excellence  
Fellow, Institute for Health, Health  
Care Policy and Aging Research*



*Fatimah Williams-Castro,  
Anthropology*

missed), as well as the problem-solving that is an inherent part of building and maintaining a website.” – **Bridget Gurtler, History**

“Prompted by recent events in Eastern Europe, I initiated a conversation on hate crime against Roma people, which led to the organization of a cross-disciplinary roundtable discussion, involving faculty from anthropology, sociology and political science. When current issues raise broad and overarching problems of race and ethnicity, the Center is able to react fast and pull scholars together from across the university to start a meaningful conversation. As a GA, I feel that this is an exceptional environment to productively go through with academic issues that are important to us.” - **Dora Vargha, History/Excellence Fellow, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research**

“This semester students of my Afro-Latin American Experience course (590:367) have been grappling with the complexities of racial formation, citizenship, and social inclusion across Central and South America. I challenged them not to think of race and blackness as fixed, but to consider the social, cultural, economic, political, and historical processes by which they are constituted according to local, national, and transnational influences. As a new instructor and scholar of race in Latin America, I searched for ways to unsettle students’ “common sense” understandings of race and blackness learned in a US context. The CRE provided a space for me to organize a film viewing and discussion for my students and the broader Rutgers community of the new documentary *Uprooted*. This seemingly small film event became a great educational and pedagogical opportunity for students to exercise their knowledge in a healthy debate and to think beyond their immediate national context to

consider questions of race and ethnicity more broadly.” - **Fatimah Williams-Castro, Anthropology**

### GRADUATE ASSISTANTS' COLLECTIVE WISDOM

#### DISSERTATION PROPOSALS

- Start writing rather than wait too long and risk paralysis.
- It does not have to be perfect, circulate it early on to help refine your ideas and get feedback.
- Remember that the proposal is just a proposal-- a fantasy document, an ideal—be aware that the project will evolve.
- Think of the proposal as an opportunity to organize your confusion.
- Look at other proposals in your discipline – look at several because they vary in format
- Be aware of disciplinary expectations. For example, some disciplines require general chapter descriptions while others do not.

#### WORKING SUCCESSFULLY WITH ADVISORS

- Think about the process strategically. There are advantages and disadvantages to having junior v. senior faculty as primary advisors.
- Generally, more established scholars will have the experience to guide you and your committee better. Keep in mind, senior faculty also tend to have larger professional networks that you can access.
- Think carefully about who your committee members are and what position they are commenting from. Take their feedback in stride
- Be professionally pragmatic in your choice – but choose people who have time for you

- Filter their comments, and remember ultimately this is *your* project
- This process is about developing your own professional and intellectual identity.
- Don't rely too much on advisors to go forward. Set your own deadlines.

#### CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

- Applying for conferences and writing abstracts are a great way of experimenting with ideas for dissertation chapters.
- They are also an opportunity to hone research questions into brief simple statements that can be understood by scholars outside your area of specialty.
- They are a good exercise in learning to state your ideas up front and expressing your claims succinctly.
- Take them also as an opportunity to benefit from sharing your ideas with established scholars.
- When using jargon/specialized terminology, be sure to clearly state what you mean. The purpose of specialized vocabulary is to advance your argument not to obscure it!

#### ORGANIZING CONFERENCE PANELS

- Conferences are good spaces to present ideas in different phases of development—but the tradeoff is they can be a drain on your time.
- When putting together a panel, think beyond topical commonality. Look for unexpected linkages that will produce fruitful conversations.
- Aim for cross-disciplinarity: this helps enrich the discussion.
- Think carefully about how you name panels, they should not be too narrow or too broad. Ask yourself what will appeal to potential conference attendees.

## CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

- Conference papers can provide useful deadlines for getting dissertation ideas into written form.
- You can use conference presentations to establish your expertise in a particular area; however, think through the timing of presenting your work publicly – you don't want to give away your dissertation's argument too soon.
- Take a conversational approach to presentations, but be aware of disciplinary expectations.
- Begin by telling your audience what to expect and then present your argument.
- Don't spend too much time on a lit review when presenting, focus on your ideas and conclusions.
- Don't over-compensate by referencing everything you've ever done or read.
- Time and practice your presentation. Running over the set time limit is never a good way to present your work.

## APPLYING FOR GRANTS

- Apply often but be aware that rejection is part of the process. Remember, there are things to be gained from the application process itself.
- Start preparing early.
- Understand what the funder wants and gear your application to those wants.
- Explore different aspects of your project in funding applications – they are a good way to determine how flexible the boundaries of your project are.
- Know the audience that you are writing to – it may be useful to talk to faculty or other students who have applied.

- Readers are not necessarily knowledgeable about your specialty or topic. Make it compelling to a general academic audience.
- Informal or formal discussion groups are a great resource for circulating, revising and strategizing for funding applications. Work sessions at the CRE, for instance, are a great environment for this purpose.

## PRODUCING DISSERTATION CHAPTERS

- Though you may not know it, you already know how to write a chapter! Think of each chapter as an extended seminar paper. The only difference is that your chapter has a relationship to a larger framework.
- Set guidelines with your advisor about the process of creating and circulating drafts of your work.
- Create peer dissertation groups – CRE work sessions are a good example.
- Find appropriate venues to share your work. It should be a place where you build confidence and get constructive feedback.
- Use regular meetings as deadlines for getting a chapter ready to circulate to appropriate peer group.
- It can be useful to circulate the first 5-10 pages of a chapter to see if it invites interest and conveys your central ideas.
- You can circulate among different members of your committee at different points in time.
- Set deadlines: figure out a work schedule that works for you. But be realistic about the deadlines you set, and then honor them.

## WRITING CHALLENGES

- Being a scholar is about being a writer.
- Just do it. Don't get stranded in preparation. Write every day.
- Find your own rhythm. Notice what time of day you work best, and once you find that time, protect it zealously.
- You will be tempted to procrastinate; fight the urge when you can. Figure out ways to make writing itself a form of procrastination.
- Assign goals for your time – teaching, writing, socializing, watching TV, etc.
- Cookies and other treats are necessary. So is the gym!
- Talking to other students is important and will help you remain optimistic— especially, at that stage when the process becomes more solitary (think ABD here).
- Isolation is counterproductive and at its worst paralyzes and fuels insecurities.
- Writing is a product and process of collective knowledge. You're not as smart as a written description of your project on any given day.
- Writing is re-writing, accept it.

## JOB MARKET

- Attend as many job talks as you can stand without raising your anxiety level. These will help you prepare for when you give your own job talk.
- Understand whether the position you are applying for is about teaching or research, or both, and highlight that in your cover letter
- Include all relevant information in your cover letter up front; try not to write more than a page for your letter.

- Talk to as many people as possible (senior graduate students as well as faculty) about their experiences and consider their advice.
- Input from faculty who have served on search committees is especially important.
- Learn about the department you are applying to in advance of the application. Have questions for them when you interview, and remember that they want to know you as a whole person— not just as a scholar.



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**For bios of all our GAs, visit:**  
<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/who.html>