

Phelps-Ward, R., Denton, D., Harry D., Bankole, A., Thompson, K., & Nkrumah, K., (2026). Empowering graduate students in the assessment process through critical participatory action research Methodologies. *Intersection: A journal at the intersection of assessment and learning, Early View*.

Empowering Graduate Students in the Assessment Process Through Critical Participatory Action Research Methodologies

Robin Phelps-Ward Ed.D., Danielle Denton M.A., Dion Harry Ph.D., Anuoluwapo Bankole M.A., Kayla Thompson M.S., & Kwame Nkrumah M.A.

Author Note

Robin Phelps-Ward <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7942-2462>

Danielle Denton <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4653-979X>

Dion Harry <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7386-1392>

Anuoluwapo Bankole <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1306-6677>

Kayla Thompson <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1813-8740>

Kwame Nkrumah <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6540-7264>

“We have no conflicts of interest to disclose”

Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

Early View

Abstract: Higher education and student affairs professionals can further align with the ACCELERATE principles and increase their focus on collaboration, equity, learning, and action by engaging photovoice methodology and critical participatory action research approaches across the assessment process. The manuscript authors use the case study of the Action Research Collective (a non-course-bound graduate student research team) at Ball State University (a large, comprehensive, public university in Indiana) and previously at Clemson University (a large, public university in South Carolina), to illuminate opportunities for assessment leaders to collaborate with graduate students. Through the assessment process leaders can teach about research and assessment, attend to action-oriented outcomes that directly impact graduate students, and bolster efforts to eliminate inequities. Through a discussion of the research team’s process of assessing the graduate education climate, the authors call for greater attention to engaging students in the assessment process to educate, empower, co-create, and address disparities.

Keywords: *graduate student, assessment, participatory action research*

Introduction

The definition of ACCELERATE from Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al. (2025) clearly articulates and models what assessment should look like in higher education, be it in public, private, technical, or four-year institutions. Often, postsecondary leaders place greater emphasis on supporting undergraduate students, perhaps because graduate students are assumed to possess prior experience navigating higher education systems (Taylor & Holberg, 1999). However, institutions may inadvertently cause harm to graduate students by requiring them to independently seek out opportunities and resources that support their success (Love et al., 2026). The effects of this unintentional institutional neglect are evident in the cyclical and traditional practices that prioritize assessment and other forms of inquiry

(i.e., research and evaluation) led by faculty, administrators and other non-student leaders within postsecondary education. With a focus on the ACCELERATE principles of being Learning-Centered, Action-Driven, Equity and Empowerment-Motivated, Collaborative, and Co-Creative, we (a group of faculty and doctoral students in the field of higher education) advocate for the empowerment of graduate students as part of critical participatory action research teams leading assessment of graduate education and campus climate outcomes.

As policies in higher education shift in response to the political climate, posing threats to accessible, inclusive, and welcoming campus cultures, a need exists to focus on empowering students to spur change. By designing programming tailored to graduate students and applying ACCELERATE principles to those initiatives, we can expect outcomes such as graduate students who become professionals committed to disrupting cycles of neglect within academia and the broader postsecondary ecosystem. From beginning with programmatic and learning outcomes that highlight students' belonging and use of services, to ending with the use of data to inform the implementation of changes, the assessment cycle (Finney & Horst, 2019) is one often devoid of students throughout all steps in the process. Through this manuscript we document the praxis employed by a research group to engage graduate students as researchers and leaders in institutional assessment. More specifically, through this manuscript we discuss what it looks like to invite graduate students to the inquiry table to ask relevant assessment questions, collect and analyze data, communicate findings, and enact changes to support the graduate student campus climate all throughout the process. Within this manuscript we also aim to provide a rich example for other institutions, one in which graduate student voices are elevated, heard, and used to influence policies, either during their time as students or throughout their professional practice in their various fields of practice.

Higher education and student affairs professionals can further align with the ACCELERATE principles and increase their focus on collaboration, equity, learning, and action by leveraging photovoice methodology and critical participatory action research methods across the assessment process. This manuscript uses the case study of the Action Research Collective, which is a non-course-bound graduate student research team at Ball State University (a large, comprehensive, public university in the Midwest). By focusing on the case of ARC we illuminate opportunities for assessment leaders to collaborate and empower students throughout the assessment process while teaching them about research, attending to action-oriented outcomes that directly impact students, and bolster efforts to eliminate inequities. Through a discussion of the research team's process of assessing the graduate education climate and elements of thriving, support, obstacles, and needs, we call for greater attention to involving students in the assessment process to educate, empower, co-create, and address disparities.

In this manuscript we center the ACCELERATE (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025) principles that emphasize assessment practices that are (a) collaborative and co-creative; (b) equity and empowerment-motivated; (c) learning centered; and (d) action-driven through a discussion of the application of critical participatory action research design (Fine et al., 2021) and photovoice methodology (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997) in the assessment inquiry process (Kortegast et al., 2021). We begin with a discussion of the need for more expansive approaches to assessment inquiry,

which center those impacted by the assessment (in this case, graduate students). We focus on the case of the ARC as part of Ball State University's former inclusive excellence and student success initiatives within the Graduate School. Then, we move further into the case with a description of the steps taken to organize the team in association with the Graduate School, and actions the team took to assess the psychosocial campus climate for graduate students. Within this section, we also include a brief history of ARC as a framework for graduate student development (Harrington & Phelps-Ward, 2021; Phelps-Ward, 2020), which began in 2016 at Clemson University. Finally, we end the manuscript by emphasizing the aforementioned ACCELERATE principles, highlighting each principle at work within the case study, posing recommendations and resources for professionals seeking to amplify the ACCELERATE principles.

Principles of Action, Collaboration, Equity and Learning for Graduate Student Success

The present state of higher education has undergone several changes that have affected the experiences of graduate students across many campus communes. In the United States, the status of international students, institutional climate for equity and inclusion, and student morale have become more dire than ever (Fischer, 2026; Elias, 2025; Valandra et al., 2022). Such circumstances necessitate actionable, collaborative, and equitable measures to foster student learning and success.

As current doctoral students and faculty working at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), we have experienced the impact of these institutional shifts firsthand. Our experiences have strengthened our commitment to advocating for practices and services that more effectively support learners from marginalized populations. In their evaluation of a diversity, equity and inclusion professional development certificate offered through a large Midwestern university, Willis and Schram (2023) situated their study to highlight a national call for racial justice. They explained that these demands prompted higher education leaders to urge colleges and universities to confront institutional structures that reproduce racial inequity and white supremacy. Through their inquiry, students and faculty advocated for more meaningful institutional commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion, including mandatory training for instructors and curricular attention to race and social justice. Such calls for more substantive institutional change are particularly relevant as institutions seek to align their commitments to expand access and support an increasingly diverse graduate student population. However, an important question remains: how can institutions of higher learning empower graduate students in the processes of assessment of their own experiences while supporting research endeavors?

According to Montenegro and Jankowski (2017), assessment encourages work to be reflective of students served and to ultimately use the data to address gaps in learning, persistence, and attainment. Further, Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al. (2025) highlight the importance of working to "intentionally collaborate and co-create with diverse partners, including learners, in all parts of the assessment endeavor" (p. 4). Students learn how to interact with the data to become data-informed and rather than being data-driven (i.e., understanding how to be methodologically competent and able to use data appropriately to drive institutional decision-making). In their discussion on student

assessment in a general education program, Carpenter et al. (2021) explained that student participation in assessment is especially important in servicing all learners. They argued that just as faculty involvement strengthens assessment, the inclusion of diverse student perspectives also enhances the assessment process (Carpenter et al., 2021).

Drawing on the co-collaborative framework of students as partners further emphasizes that meaningful student involvement is critical to bringing valuable knowledge to the research process (Carpenter et al., 2021). Graduate students who collaborate in this manner offer an authentic perspective based upon their experiences. Students can provide insight on curriculum, services offered by the institution, and campus ecosystems to include climate and culture. Graduate student co-collaboration on assessment not only provides critical insight about faculty, administration and program strengths, it highlights areas for improvement. Furthermore, inviting graduate students into assessment and research aids in safeguarding against conscious or implicit biases that arise when faculty principal investigators proclaim to know what students think or how they feel. Students can articulate nuanced challenges, such as stereotypical behaviors and experiences of discrimination that significantly impact their academic success. Incorporating diverse student perspectives is essential for identifying systemic gaps and designing targeted interventions, particularly to support those from historically marginalized populations (Aktaş, 2024; Bowers et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions must be intentional about student involvement. An equity-minded approach (Bensimon et al., 2016) is essential for challenging institutional norms and hidden barriers that do not support accessibility of marginalized student populations (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Furthermore, student engagement encourages student success. According to Astin (1984), a highly involved student is one who devotes considerable energy to studying, being actively involved in campus organizations and interacts frequently with faculty and peers (i.e., involvement spurs engagement), a critical investment in the student experience. Students can aid in defining success outside of achievement attainment. Engagement also encourages student well-being, career readiness, and personal growth (Kubu, 2023). Other benefits of involving graduate students in assessment relate to agency and motivation. Active participation in assessment and research fosters student responsibility and accountability for their learning and signals that their diverse experiences are valuable (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Student feedback and involvement directly informs curriculum, support services, and student success, creating a cyclical process for continuous improvement (Kubu, 2023). However, postsecondary leaders can go a step farther by not only involving students in assessment, but by empowering students to lead the inquiry itself.

About the Action Research Collective

When we only name the problem, when we state a complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture. (hooks, 2004, p. xiv)

The above quote from bell hooks emphasizes the power and need to not only acknowledge the barriers within systems that do not work to serve everyone, but to also change them. In essence, this is

what ARC endeavors to do. ARC is a community predominantly comprised of graduate students of color (including international students), students with disabilities, and students who identify within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and questioning (LGBTQ+) community, who come together to study their experiences—and those of other graduate students with marginalized identities in higher education. ARC is a research team financially and institutionally supported by the Graduate School, led by graduate students with the support of a higher education faculty member who gained financial support (a stipend at one institution and a course release at the other), and voluntary for students to join. Support for students' participation came from the Graduate School in the form of a modest stipend of \$500 used at the students' discretion.

The demographic makeup of the team, averaging about 10-20 members, shifts each semester as new students join and veteran members graduate. All graduate students (and some highly interested undergraduate students) are welcome to participate, though recruitment centers the historically marginalized groups listed above. Ultimately, the team examines how institutional support, policy, and campus culture either nurture or impede graduate students' growth and persistence toward earning a post-baccalaureate credential.

ARC as Equitable

At its core, ARC is a space for critical inquiry grounded in social justice. Its research addresses four major areas: students' needs, the obstacles they encounter, the forms of support necessary for them to thrive, and their ability to thrive (Bowers et al., 2020). These commitments extend to demystifying the graduate school pipeline for students who were never meant to see themselves in academic spaces shaped by whiteness (Wilder, 2013). ARC's commitments also seek to shape institutional policy and institutional culture with the findings from research studies carried out within the cohort of participants.

ARC as Creative

ARC's approach to research is collaborative, creative, and equitable. Drawing from critical participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2021; Mohajeri et al., 2026), team members contribute according to their strengths, while shared goals are collectively defined. ARC operates as a counterspace where graduate students reclaim their agency "as they seek to promote greater self and social change" (Dillard, 2020, p. 48). It is both a research collective and a sanctuary, one that values vulnerability, honors lived experiences, and amplifies voices that are too often silenced in predominantly white institutions; it is a liberatory research team (Phelps-Ward et al., 2026). Through photography, spoken word, poetry, and visual arts, ARC offers a space for graduate student co-researchers to reflect on their experiences in the context of postsecondary education and express them in their scholarship.

ARC as Action Driven

Through exhibitions, conferences, and publications, ARC pushes conversations about equity for marginalized graduate students into institutional consciousness. What began as a response to a racist campus climate at a university in South Carolina has grown into a model replicated across a large, public institution in the Midwest. At both campuses, ARC created opportunities for community-

building, professional development, peer-to-peer mentorship, empowerment, and creative expression (Harrington & Phelps-Ward, 2021). ARC also nurtures reflection and introspection, helping members recognize their agency in shaping belonging and navigating the demands of graduate education. Research teams that prioritize action and praxis (i.e., the connection between theory and practice for change) represent examples of emancipatory research counterspaces (Phelps-Ward, 2020).

ARC as Collaborative

ARC centers the knowledge, creativity, and expertise of graduate students to produce insights essential for supporting minoritized students at PWIs. ARC's work expands professional development pathways, foregrounds community-based research, and prioritizes marginalized voices in conversations about institutional climate and student success. Through photovoice, participatory action research, and collective meaning-making, members share their experiences, articulate challenges, and build networks of support. As Breeden et al. (2026) highlighted, the key to critical participatory action research that is truly collaborative is to "ensure that community members are genuinely involved and that actions taken are meaningful, contextually appropriate, and considerate of the risks to all participants" (p. 8).

ARC as Learning-Centered

Along with the elements of ARC being a creative, action-oriented, and collaborative space, ARC is learning-centered. At its core, the team came together to support students' learning and capacity to carry out critical inquiry. To do this, the team spent substantial time collectively learning about systems of oppression and campus racial climate theory (Hurtado et al., 1998), research design, photovoice methodology (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997), photo elicitation, interviewing, data analysis, and coding (to name a few of the workshop foci). The community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002) represented an experiential learning space where members could not only explore new ideas but teach from their own sets of disciplinary expertise (e.g., student affairs master's students on the team taught about program design while elementary education doctoral students taught the group about program evaluation).

We continue to do this work because it matters. ARC matters because it reframes graduate students not as passive recipients of institutional decisions but as thinkers, creators, and partners in shaping equitable futures. Most importantly, ARC's broad impact reaches students, staff, leadership, and the greater campus community.

Team Structure, Critical Participatory Action Research, and Photovoice Methodology

ARC employed approaches of critical participatory action research and photovoice, to carry out its research. In terms of the structure, team members joined voluntarily in response to invitations from the principal investigator (Robin). Team members agreed to a basic set of expectations (i.e., meeting bi-weekly, communicating absence, and participating fully in the team's work in exchange for peer mentorship, opportunity to lead a research project, and \$500 worth of professional development funding). Meetings began with informal check-ins in response to a question of the day (e.g., what retro

snack best describes your personality?) before turning to the meetings focus (e.g., planning an event, brainstorming ideas, reflecting on experiences). It is important to note that the timeline of formation of the study attached to the team's work to data collection over a span of several years. Thus, after the team was formed and settled on a research topic and question, the group wrote a research proposal that gained institutional review board (IRB) approval. Then, team members who met the criteria for the research study (i.e., held a marginalized social identity as a graduate student) and desired to participate were interviewed by another research team member. As the team collected data and gained insights from the graduate students who participated in the study, the team discussed ideas for improvement and worked with the respective Graduate School leaders to make change (e.g., insights from the study at the Midwest university led to the development of a holistic professional development program open to all graduate students). Given the principal investigator's role as a faculty fellow at the Southeastern institution and later the associate dean of the Graduate School at the Midwest institution, a clear path for open communication existed to impact practices and policy within graduate education. Ultimately, the team analyzed the data as a group and subsequently planned community events, conference presentations, and publications to share the findings more expansively across educational contexts.

Critical Participatory Action Research

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) is an approach to inquiry that involves incorporating those who are typically excluded from research and decision-making and those most vulnerable to injustice (Fine & Torre, 2021). This framework calls for a diversity of perspectives and experiences from individuals with varying levels of power, particularly centering individuals from historically marginalized groups and those most affected by decision-making. When using CPAR, community members are engaged as co-researchers, enriching the inquiry process at all stages with their knowledge and skills. This approach is grounded in the belief that researchers are limited by their own biases, assumptions, and experiences, and thus the voices of those at the center of the inquiry are needed. Incorporating those most familiar with the context not only empowers them by providing an avenue to share their voice and initiate change and allows for the emergence of knowledge that might not have manifested without their involvement.

CPAR aligns well with the ACCELERATE principles, particularly those connected to collaboration, equity, learning, and action in several ways. First, CPAR emphasizes the act of working in concert with communities rather than unilaterally making decisions about research design, data collection, analysis, and communicating about findings. Leaders who take up a CPAR approach in their work can rest assured that if they honor the values of CPAR, they will also honor the Collaborative and Co-Creative principle within ACCELERATE, which encourages those facilitating assessment to partner with those truly impacted by the assessment. Second, CPAR challenges the typical power structures present in assessment processes and allows access to the decision-making, information, and resources not generally provided to participants within inquiry settings. Such a value for dismantling oppressive power structures by sharing power with would-be participants directly relates with the Equity and Empowerment-Motivated principle that highlights removing barriers in the assessment process so that all parties involved are empowered and able to assist in fostering equitable practices, policies, programs, and processes. Third, by inviting a diverse group of people into the research process through

a CPAR design, an emphasis on learning exists. Thus, the Learning-Centered ACCELERATE principle also ties into CPAR as it foregrounds the significance of assessment as a “pragmatic, authentic, and context-specific” approach that can support learning within an educational environment, particularly for students (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, p. 5). A focus on collaboration, equity, empowerment, and learning naturally begets action as those who are part of the assessment inquiry feel empowered to transform the culture and climate because the inquiry was “for us by us” as Breeden et al. (2026) stressed in their chapter making a case for a new era of CPAR in the context of higher education.

In the context of ARC, where the primary study explored the graduate education climate, the population of interest to be included as co-researchers were historically marginalized graduate students, including graduate students of color, graduate students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ graduate students. Generally speaking, students are not typically involved in institutional assessment and decision-making processes beyond being sources for data collection. Furthermore, students from historically marginalized backgrounds listed above are the most sensitive to institutional practices, policies, or culture that perpetuate inequities (Clement et al., 2024; Patrón & Flores, 2026; Phelps, 2024). Therefore, in alignment with a CPAR approach, the ARC team, organized by a graduate school faculty member and administrator, consisted of graduate students, most of whom identified as belonging to a historically marginalized group. The inclusion of students as researchers, not just participants, centers their knowledge as experts of their contexts, respects their skill and expertise as graduate-level scholars, and upholds the ideal that everyone should have the right to participate in research (Appadurai, 2006).

Photovoice

Complementary to CPAR, the ARC team also employed photovoice methodology. Photovoice is a participatory method that uses photography to engage participants in the research process (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants are to shape the research process by calling attention to what matters most to them. Using photographs, participants share their responses to prompts regarding concerns or strengths in their community. These photos are used as a basis for interviews to learn more about the participants’ experiences. Photographs and ensuing findings are meant to be a catalyst for critical dialogue and reflection to spark social change (Sutton-Brown, 2014). This method centers the knowledge and experience of participants by shifting power to them in determining what information is important and giving them the means to communicate it. Photovoice connects participants in a way that is accessible regardless of literacy or language (Wang & Burris, 1997). ARC employed both photovoice and CPAR approaches in its projects by providing graduate student team members with the agency to lead each stage of the research process. Beginning with establishing the research questions. At Clemson University, where ARC began, the students decided to focus on the experiences of support, obstacles, and thriving for graduate students of color at the university (Phelps-Ward, 2020). This decision was based on their personal experiences and sense of what the university needed. When ARC was established at Clemson University, participating students chose to continue using the photovoice methodology and expanded the population of interest to also include graduate students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ graduate students. Prompts for taking photographs and interview guides were then developed and conducted by the team. Members learned and practiced the steps and details of data collection, like keeping records confidential and storing data, and

practiced interviews in pairs within the team. Participants in the study took approximately 12 photos in response to 4 prompts: Where have you found support as a graduate student at Clemson University? What obstacles have you encountered as a graduate student at Clemson University? What does it mean to you to thrive as a graduate student? What needs do you have as a graduate student at Clemson University? After uploading the photos, participants met a team member for a semi-structured interview lasting about an hour. During the interview, the team members showed the participants their photos and allowed them to explain what each photo meant and why they took it. ARC team members who met the inclusion criteria also engaged in the study as participants.

Members received instruction and practice on the chosen analysis method, thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). After initial analysis, the team had discussions on emergent themes to reach consensus on what the broader themes they present as findings would be (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Thematic analysis as a team



Figure 2

Team organizing photos in preparation for symposium presentations



Next, team members collaborated on various methods for dissemination (See Figure 2). At Clemson University and Ball State University, team members presented emergent findings at conferences and organized photovoice exhibitions on campus for community members to discuss findings and ideas for action. Some students conducted further analysis as projects for academic requirements.

In the end, by involving students in the research process, they were able to take ownership of projects and drive them forward. At each stage, ARC members collaboratively made decisions that resulted in a project for students and by students, producing insights that could only be uncovered utilizing a CPAR

approach. The photovoice methodology produced visual data that illustrated the graduate student experience that some may not have expected, providing opportunities for deeper reflection, dialogue, and learning. Perhaps most importantly, this participatory approach provided a unique and empowering professional development opportunity for students, most of whom identified as being from historically marginalized groups. Lastly, in line with the goal of photovoice, ARC's projects are aimed at initiating change by informing faculty and administrators on campus and beyond of the experiences of graduate students in hopes of inspiring more equitable and effective practices, policies, and areas of support.

ARC at Clemson University

ARC at Clemson University began in spring 2016, amid the height of racial tension and protest on campus (e.g., a student sit-in) and nationally (the Concerned Student 1950 at the University of Missouri-Columbia [Skidmore, 2025]). It started as a student-driven research team that brought together students, staff, and faculty to engage in critical dialogue about the experiences of graduate students of color (GSOCs) on a predominantly white campus with a history of racism. In line with the goals of CPAR and the ACCELERATE principle of Collaborative and Co-Creative, team members were heavily involved in all stages of the research design process, beginning with brainstorming sessions to develop the project and opportunities for graduate students on the team to share their personal stories as GSOCs, which further aided the project's development. With workshops that taught the team about research design, photovoice methodology, and qualitative data analysis, the ARC team's work aligned with the Learning-Centered principle of ACCELERATE to ensure those involved with the project also gained intellectually and psychosocially. Next, we developed interview protocols and recruitment materials and secured IRB approval for the project. Upon approval, recruitment and interviewing began, with all team members serving as interviewers and some also as research participants. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to be currently enrolled as GSOC at a PWI. While collecting data, the team met regularly to share updates on what they had learned from their interviews and to prepare for data analysis.

Over time, the ARC at Clemson University amassed a total of 38 members engaged for varying lengths of time and in varying capacities. When broken down, approximately 90% of members were people of color, and 90% were enrolled as graduate students at the time of their engagement. Those who were not graduate students were either full-time faculty or staff, all of whom held a doctoral degree prior to joining the team. Additionally, 40% of the team participated in the photovoice research project, while other participants were GSOCs who were not involved with the research team.

From this research, we learned that many GSOCs often felt isolated and as if they did not belong because of the severe lack of people of color in their classes and programs (both students and employees), the microaggressions they experienced in these spaces, and the presence of racism on campus through campus practices, policies, and landmarks and buildings that revered the legacies of white supremacists associated with the institution's history (Bowers et al. 2020; Harrington & Phelps-Ward, 2020; Phelps-Ward et al., 2021). Additionally, GSOCs recounted financial burdens during their studies, the need for greater representation and support on campus, and the importance of

community and affinity spaces, which helped them thrive and continue their studies. After completing data collection and analysis, the team disseminated these findings through various channels, including presentations at multiple national academic conferences and the publication of multiple journal manuscripts (Bowers, 2020; Harrington, 2025; Phelps-Ward, 2021). However, one of the most impactful avenues was the three photovoice exhibitions the team planned and implemented on [Southeastern University]’s campus to visually share our work with the public. Such practice aligns with the Action-Driven ACCELERATE principle, which highlights the importance of making a difference within the context. The team held campus forums to discuss the findings, engage in dialogue with the campus community about the necessary changes, and collaborate on ideas for solutions to address the issues graduate students within the research study illuminated (e.g., providing more evenly distributed graduate assistant stipend amounts across colleges). Further, the existence of ARC is action-driven through its sheer existence because as students on the team and within the study communicated needs for connection and belonging, they were invited to join the team’s work and be part of the initiative to improve conditions for graduate students. The exhibitions were marketed to the [Southeastern University] community, attracting the interest of university leaders, faculty, staff, students, and campus and community partners, and providing an opportunity for attendees to view our photographs, learn more about ARC, and learn about our campus experiences as GSOCs. For a full breakdown of the quantitative context regarding the students involved in the research study, see [Bowers et al., 2020], which highlights the findings from the photovoice study.

While researchers gained valuable research experience, professional development, and opportunities to share knowledge with the field and the Clemson University community, the most monumental outcome of ARC was its transformation into a much needed counterspace. Solórzano et al. (2000) define counterspaces as academic and social spaces that serve as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). As such, ARC served as a space of support, validation, and resistance for people of color navigating racism and microaggressions in and out of the classroom (e.g., seeing signs promoting the KKK or hearing African Americans referred to as “The Blacks” in class discussions). Throughout our time at [Southeastern University], many of us endured distasteful experiences with colleagues and peers, and we often found ourselves as one of the few or the only people of color in classrooms and workplaces. That said, what began as a research space quickly became a communal space for graduate students, staff, and faculty navigating the throes of academia.

The Action Research Collective at Ball State University

The ARC at Ball State University positioned graduate students as producers of knowledge, not as research participants, whose experiences influenced the outcome of the final project. Participants in ARC at Ball State are primarily graduate students from diverse groups, including LGBTQ+ students, students of color, international graduate students, and graduate students with disabilities. This platform created by the ARC offers a critical space to reflect on graduate students’ experiences and is an addition to efforts made to improve campus climate for graduate students. Using photovoice research methodology, ARC facilitated the expression of reality by and for the graduate students in a manner that was genuine and supportive of their experiences.

In addition to the ARC team members participating in interviews, historically marginalized graduate students were recruited to participate. This includes online and on-campus graduate students of color, graduate students with disabilities, and graduate students who identify as LGBTQ+. Participants were asked to take photos that symbolically captured images of their needs, challenges, support, and thriving experiences as graduate students. The photographs were a useful means of initiating narratives during peer interviews, in which the graduate students were encouraged to interview one another rather than conduct interviews with members of the faculty and administration (typically the case in qualitative research with faculty or administrators as principal investigators conducting all research interviews). ARC enabled the empowerment of participants through collective meaning-making. After conducting interviews, graduate student researchers convened on a regular basis to look at patterns emerging in the narratives and images, as well as collectively determine shared themes emerging. This allowed participants to again feel as if they had agency within the study. Findings suggested that invested faculty, faculty that shared identities with participants, and university efforts to create welcoming and inclusive environments were sources of support for participants. Conversely, participants highlighted challenges like workload, distance from family, financial strain, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings, along with recommendations, were presented to faculty and administrators to inform them of the experiences of historically marginalized students at their institution, in hopes of shaping policies and practices that support these students. Additionally, these findings were shared with the broader university community and beyond at institutional and national conferences to spark conversations around student support and inform others of the utility of this approach to inquiry.

The culminating presentation of these findings was a photovoice exhibition at the Multicultural Center, which served as an important means of amplifying the voices of graduate students (Figure 3) by presenting to campus stakeholders, such as professors and administrators. This enabled ARC to provide graduate student voices with direct representation in campus discourse on equity, support, and belonging. Therefore, ARC functioned as both a research collective and an advocacy space that enabled the translation of personal experience into collective knowledge to improve the campus climate for graduate students.

The implications of this study are twofold. This study produced actionable findings regarding the experiences of historically marginalized students that university interest holders can use to better support students. While the findings are an important product of the process, an equally important outcome—and the focus of this manuscript—is to support the development of graduate student researchers, inclusive engagement of marginalized graduate students, and direct avenues for dialogue built between students and campus interest holders facilitated by this collaborative and student-driven approach to assessment.

Figure 3

Photovoice exhibition at [Ball State University].



Discussion: Comparing Two Contexts

Several similarities and differences exist across the two ARC teams at Clemson University and Ball State University. We name the varying contexts to illuminate for readers how specific features impact the implementation of similar assessment efforts at other schools with an interest in adopting such an approach. While both teams examined the research through a critical lens examining systems of oppression at work within the campus community, received university support through graduate education areas (i.e., the Graduate School) through faculty fellowship initiatives, and engaged almost identical organizational structures (i.e., a faculty member served as the primary investigator coordinating the administrative work of the team while students led the day to day research and social activities of the team), the institutional type and research questions were different. Clemson University is a large, predominantly white, public, very high research institution in the southeast of the United States with a palpable culture of racism, while Ball State University is a large, predominantly white, public, high research institution in the Midwest of the United States with a history of and mission of producing educators to serve the region. Additionally, while the ARC team at Clemson University chose to focus on graduate students of color, given a recent event of campus racism, the ARC team at Ball State University decided to focus on queer graduate students, graduate students of color, and graduate students with disabilities, given the identities of students on the team. It is important to note that, given the institutional support and structure of the two teams embedded within the Graduate School at both universities, administrators (at both institutions) invested in the team's work with the goal of improving programs, practices, and policies for graduate students across campus.

Recommendations: Connecting ACCELERATE to Graduate Education

Given such an interest in examining the campus climate for graduate students (particularly for those who hold marginalized identities) and ways to improve student success (i.e., satisfaction, retention, and engagement with graduate education resources), we end this manuscript by focusing on the elements of Learning, Action, Equity, and Collaboration as part of the ACCELERATE framework using the ARC teams at two institutions as cases. First, we recommend that campus leaders be Collaborative and Co-Creative with students and provide graduate students with ample opportunities to actively engage in work that allows them to share their personal experiences. Creating opportunities for students to share their narratives about campus experiences supports Equity and Empowerment-Motivated principle of ACCELERATE as it provides institutional leaders with examples of real student needs, ongoing campus barriers, and aspects of campus life to address and improve, helping make campus environments more inclusive and supportive for all graduate students. To do this well, we elevate our second recommendation: creating a culture that regularly embeds the core principles of ACCELERATE and CPAR methods in graduate studies and day-to-day campus assessment practices. To do this, assessment facilitators across campus, whether directors, program coordinators, or upper-level administrators, can emphasize the Learning-Centered ACCELERATE principle and teach students how to engage in and use photovoice and CPAR effectively, giving graduate students opportunities not only to learn about research methods that prioritize students' voices and provide them with agency over their experiences, but also to put this knowledge into practice.

A core component of both photovoice and CPAR is action, particularly the ability to share research findings directly with those in power to drive change. That said, we also urge campus leaders to foster a culture in which students feel they can easily and readily provide feedback and input on their campus experiences. Such a practice directly aligns with the Action-Driven ACCELERATE principle and ensures the time, energy, and resources of those involved in the assessment are being considered, and that assessment facilitators are held accountable for honoring the purpose of the research. With CPAR and ACCELERATE principles in mind, our exhibitions provided an ideal opportunity to share our knowledge and experiences with those at the institutions that had the power to change policy and practice on campus. Not only did campus leaders and community members examine research findings verbally, but they also visually depicted factors that either aided our ability to thrive on campus (e.g., affinity groups and counterspaces) or created barriers that hindered our success and engagement (e.g., racist campus landmarks). Lastly, to do this work effectively, research teams like ARC must have more than just verbal support from their institutions and their constituents. Instead, financial support and access to necessary campus resources (e.g., spaces, technology, and funding for professional development) are crucial to the ongoing success and longevity of these research teams and the continued development of graduate students.

Skills Necessary for Implementation

Critical to the holistic development of graduate students are their interactions with faculty and peers. Nothing can be more pivotal than the interactions where students are allowed to participate in the supportive environment of their chosen field. According to Dortch (2016), in order for Black graduate students to persist, “they need sufficient funding, accessible faculty and supportive environments” (p.

350). Faculty mentors are pivotal to graduate students' learning about research and their success. Furthermore, socialization of graduate students into the academic community is crucial (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008) and facilitates structure and peer connections and welcomes students. Other skillsets necessary to implement opportunities for research and assessment for graduate students surround cognitive and analytical skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, a thorough understanding of research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, data analysis and synthesizing information (Parker, 2012). Thus, those interested in implementing similar programs to ARC should ensure mechanisms to support students' understanding of key aspects of the research process.

Key Considerations for Implementation

To nurture communities and counterspaces like ARC, institutional leaders must have institutional support, a clear strategy for engaging students, and invested professionals willing to launch the project and help graduate students navigate the hidden curriculum tedium attached to the team's administration and maintenance (if your institution is able to provide students with financial support and needs to move through the Institutional Review Board process). For more details on the how of such a process, read *Liberatory Research Teams, Labs, and Collectives* (Phelps-Ward et al., 2026), which offers leaders a guide to establishing and sustaining a team like ARC. The list from (Phelps-Ward et al., 2026) provides a starting point of key considerations for leaders with a desire to initiate opportunities to do more than pay lip service to including students in assessment inquiry.

- What assessment goals do we currently need to assess that would benefit from student leadership?
- What assessment work is already happening that could benefit from student involvement and leadership?
- What examples of thriving student-focused research teams already exist at my institutions?
 - What aspects of these teams could be integrated into the developing team's work?
- What material benefits (e.g., compensation, professional development funding, course credit) exist for students to engage in involvement in an inquiry team?
- How will we recruit students to participate?
- Who are the campus champions for student learning, success, and development who might want to lead a team of students engaged in assessment inquiry?
 - How will we compensate them for their time?
- How will team member's participation in the inquiry team be recognized within the university community?
- Who will help equip the team with the knowledge, skills, and awareness needed to carry out the inquiry in an equitable way?
- What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure action can be taken (e.g., adjustments to policies, programs, and processes) as the team gains new insight about the outcomes being assessed?

Conclusion

In sum, this manuscript is about empowering students (particularly, graduate students) to be part of the assessment process to advance their understanding of critical participatory inquiry (Fine & Torre, 2021) while closing the feedback loop more quickly than the typical assessment cycle (Kuh et al.,

2015)—a process that does not always center or ensure action. Further, this manuscript's case study provides scholar-practitioners with a guide for meaningfully and effectively incorporating participatory action inquiry and photovoice in their assessment to inspire more collaboration and learning across the campus community's constituents.

References

- Akomodi, J. O. (2025). Educational diversity in the United States: Analyzing the impact of the Trump administration's policies on diversity initiative. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 9(2), 451-457.
- Aktaş, C. B. (2024). Enhancing social justice and socially just pedagogy in higher education through participatory action research. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(1), 159-175.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1966619>
- Appadurai, A. (2006). The right to research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 4(2), 167-177.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600750696>
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.
- Bensimon, E. M., Dowd, A. C., & Witham, K. (2016). Five principles for enacting equity by design. *Diversity & Democracy*, 19(1), 1-7.
<https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2016/winter/bensimon>
- Bowers, L., Harrington, K., Phelps-Ward, R., Allen, C., Smith, T. & Dsouza, N. (2020). #Mytruthmatters: narratives of graduate students of color at a predominately white institution. *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research*.
https://www.academia.edu/49949135/Bowers_et_al_2020_My_Truth_Matters_JEQR_1
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breeden, R. L., Mohajeri, O., & Ocean, M. (2026). For us by us CPAR: Making the case for a new era of CPAR in U.S. higher education contexts. In O. Mohajeri, R. L. Breeden, & M. Ocean (Eds.), *Critical participatory action research in higher education: For us by us* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003469520-2>
- Carpenter, R. L., Burgess, E., & Thorsrud, E. (2021). Engaging students as partners: Student assessment and research advisors for general education. *The Journal of General Education*, 70(4), 259-276.
<https://doi.org/10.5325/jgeneeduc.70.4.0259>
- Clement, D., Appleseth, H. S., Armstrong, C. M., Cole, A. B., & Wingate, L. R., & Leffingwell, T. R. (2024). Minoritized graduate student identity, well-being, and mental health risks for suicidality. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 18(5), 633-644. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000555>
- Dillard, N. (2020). Designing research to dismantle oppression: Utilizing critical narrative analysis and critical participatory action research in research on mothering and work and beyond. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(7), 47-60. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss7/5/>
- Dortch, D. (2016). The strength from within: A phenomenological study examining the academic self-efficacy of African American women in doctoral studies. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 350-364. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0350>

-
- Elias, J. (2026, June 26). *Nearly 70% of selective colleges lost racial diversity after admissions ban*. Inside Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/this-is-how-colleges-have-responded-to-the-end-of-race-conscious-admissions>
- Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2021). *Essentials of critical participatory action research*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000241-000>
- Fine, M., Torre, M. E., Oswald, A. G., & Avory, S. (2021). Critical participatory action research: Methods and praxis for intersectional knowledge production. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 68(3), 344–356. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000445>
- Finney, S. J., & Horst, S. J. (2019). Standards, standards, standards: Mapping professional standards for outcomes assessment to assessment practice. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(3), 310-325. <https://doi:10.1080/19496591.2018.1559171>
- Fischer, K. (2026, May 12). *The obscure rules change that could drive more foreign students away*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-obscure-rules-change-that-could-drive-more-foreign-students-away>
- Harrington, K., & Phelps-Ward, R. (2021). The Action Research Collective: Using participatory action research to support graduate student development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(6), 736-740. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850741>
- hooks, b. (2004). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203957769>
- Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., & Allen, W. R. (1998). Enhancing campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity: Educational policy and practice. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(3), 279–302. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1998.0003>
- Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T. S., Cervero, R. M., & Bowles, T. A. (2008). Lean on me: The support experiences of Black graduate students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 77(4), 365–381. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608705>
- Kortegast, C., Kelley, B. T., Latz, A. O., Phelps-Ward, R., Harry, D., Henahan, M., Larissa, G., & Labatte, J. (2021). More than a picture: Leveraging visuals in advocacy and outreach in higher education. *About Campus*, 26(4), 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086482220971278>
- Kubu, E. (2023, December 1). Reimagining graduate student professional development as an inclusion, equity, and innovation driver. *NACE Journal*.
- Latz, A. O. (2017). *Photovoice research in education and beyond: A practical guide from theory to exhibition*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724089>
- Love, H. B., Fisher, E. R., Laursen, B. K., & Dickmann, E. M. (2026). Untapped potential: Graduate students as catalysts in scientific discovery. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1746739>
- Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2017, January). *Equity and assessment: Moving towards culturally responsive assessment* (Occasional Paper No. 29). National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574461.pdf>
- Parker, R. (2012). Skill development in graduate education. *Molecular Cell*, 46(4), 377–381. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.molcel.2012.05.003>
- Patrón, O. E., & Flores, O. J. (2026). Interrogating vulnerabilities and protective factors among Latina/o graduate students: A 30-year synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, XX(X), 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543261423950>

- Phelps, E. K. (2024). *Instrumentation of queer graduate student of color persistence: an exploratory analysis*. [Doctoral dissertation, Case Western Reserve University].
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=case1712942582762081&disposition=inline
- Phelps-Ward, R. (2020). Emancipatory research counter-spaces: Theorizing about Black doctoral student socialization. In J. C. Weidman, & L. DeAngelo (Eds.), *Socialization in higher education and the early career: Theory, research and application* (pp. 241-268). Springer.
- Phelps-Ward, R. (2021). Pictures of health: Threats to well-being for graduate Students of Color and their resistance. *Journal for Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 58(5), 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2021.1943416>
- Phelps-Ward, R., Brown, T. C., & Bankole, A. (2026). *Liberatory research teams, labs, and collectives*. Routledge.
- Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda, D., Kaczmarek, D., Goyzueta, K. W., Penn, J., Flateby, T., & Tucker, C. (2025). ACCELERATE: Assessment principles for best practice. *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.61669/001c.145101>
- Skidmore, E. (2025, December 5). Community commemorates the 10-year anniversary of the Concerned Student 1950 movement.
https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/higher_education/community-commemorates-the-10-year-anniversary-of-the-concerned-student-1950-movement/article_9265a704-e32b-493a-b902-83062136df61.html
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73. <http://www.istor.org/stable/2696265>
- Sutton-Brown, C. A. (2014). Photovoice: A methodological guide. *Photography & Culture*, 7(2), 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175145214X13999922103165>
- Taylor, M., & Holberg, J. L. (1999). Tales of neglect and sadism': Disciplinarity and the figuring of the graduate student in composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 50, 607–25.
- Valandra, Fields, L., Sebree, W., & Sober, W. (2022): Navigating an anti-Black campus climate: #black@pwi. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 50(2), 513–539.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2088720>
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Wilder, C. S. (2013). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. Bloomsbury.
- Willis, D. S., & Schram, L. N. (2023). Graduate student diversity, equity and inclusion professional development. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 14(1), 63–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-02-2022-0013>

About the Authors

Robin Phelps-Ward, Associate Professor of Higher Education and Associate Dean of the Graduate School, Ball State University, rjphelpsward@bsu.edu

Danielle Denton, Doctoral Candidate in Adult and Community Education, Ball State University,
danielle.denton@bsu.edu

Dion Harry, Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs, Oklahoma State University
Oklahoma City, dion.harry@okstate.edu

Anuoluwapo Bankole, Doctoral Student in Higher Education, Ball State University,
anuoluwapo.bankole@bsu.edu

Kayla Thompson, Doctoral Student in Evaluation and Applied Research Methods, Claremont Graduate
University, kpthompson@gmail.com

Kwame Nkrumah, Doctoral Student in Higher Education, Ball State University,
kwame.nkrumah@bsu.edu