

# Gender and the Political Science Graduate Experience: When Leaning In Isn't Enough

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In the fall of 2019, The Monkey Cage released a 10-part series of essays in The Washington Post highlighting the serious and unyielding nature of gender inequality ubiquitous in political science research by evaluating gender disparities in publications, course evaluations, journal submissions, and more.<sup>2</sup> While a glaring condemnation of inequity is a rare find on a mainstream news source, the article gave a statistical foundation to what every woman<sup>3</sup> in the field of political science had experientially known for years: that being a woman in political science is an uphill battle.

Overwhelming quantitative and qualitative research has proven that despite women contributing more to teaching, mentoring, and administering in the discipline, they are less likely to advance and be recognized for their achievements (Alter et al 2020). This runs deeper than inequity in publications and service distribution — which we address in this chapter— but rather, is seeded in the heart of departmental culture. For many female professors and graduate students alike, home departments can start to feel like a Boys Club, inspiring feelings of immense stress and isolation for women (Schneider 2011). Furthermore, departments tend to place men in leadership roles allowing them to control allocation of resources. Student bodies tend to be male-dominated, leading to an overall competitive and often aggressive department culture (Niederle and Vesterlund 2011). These men often have a vested interest in maintaining institutional standards that do not serve women.

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<sup>2</sup> 2019, April 23. *Introducing the Monkey Cage Gender Gap Symposium*. The Washington Post. Retrieved November 24, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2013/09/30/introducing-the-monkey-cage-gender-gap-symposium/>.

<sup>3</sup> We use the conventional spelling of woman/women, but we want to think inclusively about any woman- or womxn-identifying individual.

**While we cannot rid every department on every campus of this deep-seated issue, there are tips and tricks we have collected to navigate our chosen discipline as women.**

## The Gendered Grad School Experience:

### *Awareness and Sharing Stories*

Radical feminists of the 1970s and 80s argued that *consciousness-raising* was the key to female empowerment and used consciousness-raising circles in order to turn what was seen as personal and individual struggles into collective understanding (MacKinnon 1982; Willis 1984). So too, we believe that coalitions among woman-identifying<sup>4</sup> academics must push for recognizing issues in academia as institutional and structural problems instead of a deeply personal and individual experience. As a result, coalitions among women in political science can alleviate the shame of isolation, imposter syndrome, and harm done by misogynistic stereotypes. In this respect, coalitions are needed in academia. At the same time, we wish to acknowledge that not all coalitions represent or are for all women. We recognize and want to reaffirm that the experience of being a woman in academia is not homogenous. A woman's race, class, sexual orientation, age, and other identities, can exacerbate or create different challenges that go beyond a shared gender identity (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1990). Here, we acknowledge different needs exist that have been identified by many intersectional feminist theorists. We encourage all prospective and current students to bring awareness to the diversity of experiences that exist within groups. While you are not alone in your struggle, also be mindful of the most vulnerable among us and how to create space while uplifting those with the most needs (Hancock 2011).

### *Structures for success*

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<sup>4</sup> We use “woman-identifying” to acknowledge the nuances in gender expression and self-identification and to push beyond gender binaries and conventional performativities of gender.

Too often, women (particularly women from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups) are admitted to political science departments in order to boost perceived diversity without the structures that allow them to succeed (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). At a base level, there are several institutional changes that we believe every department should have in place if they claim to care about their female colleagues.

The pressure for women to be caretakers in all kinds of capacities often puts an entire realm of invisible labor on them. Duties that are less rewarded in the academy are more likely to be feminized, with burdens of emotional labor often assigned to women (Bellas 1999). And, while men may be able to take summers and sabbaticals to work on research, women often go home to second shifts and full-time caretaking. Furthermore, childcare can sabotage tenure timelines. For those that do not have children, discrimination is also present, particularly in hiring processes. Women are often told to hide their marital status or future plans for fear that departments will retaliate against women who might need to take time off.

Possible solutions to these barriers include advocating for parental leave for both genders, designated pump-rooms in departments for those breastfeeding, and mandatory trainings for preventing gender discrimination in hiring and tenure review applications. While these processes require institutional support, there are also tools to navigate academia as a woman on your own. In this chapter, we have organized our thoughts into categories based on the three main categories graduate students will face once they are job candidates on the market as those categories are often replicated within the graduate student experience. These three categories—teaching, service, and research—are often new experiences for graduate students and present unique challenges based on gender. Therefore, we use those categories here as a structure to guide our advice both as a professional development tool and a practical guide.

## Teaching

The art and practice of teaching are integral to a well-rounded graduate school experience. Gaining this experience is not always straightforward and can be complicated by the barriers

women-identifying persons have in the academy and society-at-large.<sup>5</sup> Two issues present themselves to women-identifying graduate students: gaining experience and managing a classroom.

### ***Getting Access to Teaching Experience***

While some graduate programs do a thorough job of ensuring their graduates have various teaching experiences before graduation, others do not. If your institution is one of those that ensure such experiences for their graduate students, take advantage of those. In addition to volunteering to teach introductory courses, make sure to offer to teach courses in your subfield that are appropriate for a graduate student. Sometimes this may mean being a squeaky wheel — in other words, advocating for yourself may take continually drawing attention to your needs so you cannot be ignored. Often, women feel outside of the club for a variety of reasons. Make sure those who have the authority to distribute teaching assignments see you and know of your interest regularly.

If your institution is not one that offers such opportunities or if you feel left out of the available opportunities, there are a variety of ways you can ensure that you receive this type of exposure. Look for adjunct teaching roles at local institutions. Offer to lead a seminar or workshop to a local library or senior center about current political events. Find state and local organizations for civic engagement that need volunteers for mock trial and moot court competitions and coaches for mock legislative endeavors. There also may be a role for leading girls and young women in different contexts by volunteering for organizations such as the Girl Scouts and Girls on the Run that while they aren't teaching, do show the ability to mentor a group of students. These experiences and the development of content for a wide variety of audiences count as teaching experience and can often lead to other opportunities.

### ***Learning How to Teach and Run a Classroom***

The classroom may present unique challenges to women-identifying persons. Unlike cisgender men, women-identifying people (especially women of color) may find that it is difficult to

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<sup>5</sup> Here, we are specifically calling attention to the issues that women face in gaining teaching experience while in graduate school.

navigate the thin line between maintaining authority and fostering an open classroom environment where students feel like they can approach you with issues. A well-researched consequence of this is the tendency for women faculty to be rated as less effective than their cisgender male counterparts in student evaluations of teaching (Adams et al. 2021) This can be even more challenging for women of color (Pittman 2010). Though women are just as likely as men to engage in non-classroom student development (Cox et al. 2010), those experiences may be harder to navigate for women. Even identifying to your students how to address you--by Prof. X or Ms. X or by your first name--can be a complicated decision with no uniform answer for all women. Finally, you may find that your appearance takes on a different importance to your students and colleagues in a way that it does not for men.

These issues are not easily distilled into concrete advice that works for everyone. Instead, you must find what works for you and be prepared to shift if need be. While you should dress professionally, that term is often heavily used to establish gender-based standards and you can and should feel free to resist being guided by outdated advice. The authors of this piece have different expectations as to what our students call us and why we choose that route, but the one thing we have in common is that we make our preferences known at the beginning of the semester and reinforce them throughout. Finally, as for student evaluations, if you are concerned about unnecessary and harmful comments about your appearance or gender, you can work with a trusted friend to have them read the raw comments and filter the ones out that are harmful so that you can only see the ones that are important and reciprocate the same for that friend.

There is support available to help you develop your classroom style. First, look to your institution's center for teaching and learning. Most institutions have one (though the names may differ) and they often run a variety of programming throughout the year that is free and easily accessible. Second, talk to your instructors--especially your women-identifying instructors--who you have found to be innovative teachers. Finally, reach out to professional organizations. The American Political Science Association has a journal dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning of political science called the *Journal of Political Science Education*. Other journals, like *PS: Political Science & Politics*, have sections dedicated to the profession and the art of teaching. There are also other opportunities through non-political associations and

organizations online to become certified in online and hybrid teaching methodologies for low cost or free.

## Service

Often tacked on as an afterthought to a CV, service can be a valuable part of your graduate career. While at the graduate level service is often optional, it can help you develop skills for career advancement (inside or outside the academy), create opportunities for advocacy, and can be a primary mode of community-building. This section discusses how service can foster these rich communities within academia. Though service can be incredibly important, it is important to acknowledge the gendered and racialized aspects of it. It increasingly falls onto the shoulders of women and people of color to create these spaces, while also holding all other scholarly responsibilities. Additionally, service work is historically underrecognized. As such, we offer strategies to guide prospective and new students on when and where to put your energy as you balance your role(s) as mentor and scholar, but how service can be useful.

### *Service as transformative praxis*

The word service acts as a stand-in for activities outside or related to, your department, university, or the discipline more broadly that have strong mentorship components. This can be advising students on research, serving on an editorial board, assisting in conference logistics, and much more. Participating in service can be a transformative praxis, in which your skills as a mentor and researcher are honed while you do the same for others. These activities can also be confidence builders! Offering to assist undergraduate research hones your skills as a mentor and increases your leadership potential. In this way, it can also make you a more competitive applicant on the job market. Finally, one of the biggest benefits of engaging in service is the opportunity to foster a supportive community and make lasting partnerships. Great research projects have blossomed from being in the right place at the right time, and those participating in the same forms of service as you will have other commonalities. Academia can be isolating at the best of times, so it is important to take an active role in creating your community.

We offer suggestions on how to build communities of care within academia. Within your department, you can play an important role in advocating for your fellow women-identifying graduate students. This may, but does not always include, establishing department-specific women's lobbying groups. It is at the discretion of the members whether or not to include men whom you trust in the department. When organizing, you may want to address functional concerns in the department such as transparency in service hours, funding, teaching requirements, childcare services, and so on to ensure requirements are equitably distributed and supportive of gendered concerns. At the institutional level, you may find opportunities and support from the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Title IX office, childcare services, and other entities on campus that seek to support students holistically. Finally, you can propose guest speakers that are women who have successfully navigated these barriers to learn how they did so, coordinate conference panels that address gendered graduate experiences, and foster interdisciplinary mentorships outside of your home department. Although not a primary purpose of these exercises, this type of work is well-suited for inclusion in application materials that call for diversity and inclusion statements.

### ***Service as tokenization***

Often, there is an expectation in academia for cascading mentorship- PhD students advise undergraduates, early career scholars advise PhD students, and so on. However, the distribution of service is often far from equal, in its practice and effects. The success of people whom academia was not made with in mind, particularly among historically excluded and disadvantaged communities, is lauded to prospective students. This signals to both current faculty and prospective students that they are 'rare' individuals who 'beat all odds' to be at their institution (Guinier 1990). Far from the flattering image this is meant to create, it pressures scholars already in precarious positions to support others similarly marginalized. While such support can and does form organically, it should not be their sole responsibility to change the culture. These inequitable power structures can lead people to burn out more quickly and feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities (McIntosh 1989). Additionally, the pressure to succeed can foster a climate where 'no' becomes a forbidden word. Breaking this cycle where people are expected to overcommit, especially graduate students and non-tenured faculty, can lessen the

tendency for service to become burdensome rather than transformative. The next section discusses the importance of creating boundaries for one's mental and physical well-being.

### ***Setting boundaries***

The myth of meritocracy in academia creates pressures to say yes to opportunities at the expense of mental well-being. Participating in service activities can be an incredibly beneficial experience for fostering community and engaging with passionate individuals. But, as the previous section highlighted, these opportunities should not come at the expense of your other obligations or cause undue stress. That being said, everyone's personal calculus for what service acts to commit to and what to say no to will be different. This section proposes aspects to keep in mind when deciding.

If you are a PhD student, committing to service cannot take precedence over advancing to candidacy, defending, and dissertating. Prioritizing this time to develop as a researcher is critical. This is not to say do not engage in service, but to be cognizant of other competing responsibilities. Additionally, while these can be great experiences for developing interpersonal skills and creating spaces to transform inequitable power structures, it should never come at the expense of your mental and physical well-being. In this regard, it is important to practice grace with yourself; saying no can be difficult, but it can also be the right call to make.

## Research

To the end of developing internal support structures for research, we focus on shedding light on the "hidden" curriculum that is often not something one learns from class material. While some of the curriculum stems from how to find resources, another key portion of this curriculum is about how to identify and problem-solve needs and resources.

### ***Imbalances in Rank, Publications, and Methodology***

While the graduate student experience is wrought with many challenges, an outlook for women graduate students suggests that women "lean in" and work harder (Alter et al. 2020), but face the difficulties of a leaky pipeline due to several factors (Teele and Thelen 2017). Indeed, although



women are over-represented in undergraduate programs, by the time we look at tenured, full professors, they are seriously underrepresented in the profession (Teele and Thelen 2017). And, as one might expect, women scholars are also underrepresented at the top ten journals in the profession (Teele and Thelen 2017) and underrepresented in citations (Shames and Wise 2017).

If rank and citations contain gender imbalances, so too does representation of women across subfields and methodology. Women are more likely to publish research with qualitative data than quantitative. This, of course, limits the type of journals that accept manuscripts for publication, but also becomes a self-reinforcing problem where general interest journals are less likely to publish quantitative data and authors are less likely to submit them. Beyond this is a general attitude that non-mathematically-based methods lack “rigor” and are “discredited” (Poete and Ostrom 2005).

While we want to recognize the external structures that add barriers to women graduate students and their research, we believe the focus for research should be on creating internal structures and systems that create support for research. Importantly, these challenges are also likely to intersect with women who are also historically underrepresented due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender expression, sexuality, language, or another identity dimension (Hancock 2011).

### ***Keeping your eyes on the prize***

Although students applying to graduate school often have a vision of what their ideal research agenda looks like, this knowledge may vary due to past lived experience (including in previous employment), shifting interests as learning progresses, and a need to pivot a research agenda due to various obstacles. The most important recommendation we might have is to create a graduate-student mission statement or values statement where the ideas and interests that brought you to graduate school live, and which you can use as a decision-making tool to navigate various challenges across their graduate experience.

Second, creating a structure of how to move your research forward is critical. At the top level is mapping out (as early as you are able) the key research milestones you need to be aware of as a

graduate student. As students move through the program, and as research progresses, continue to add specific goals and deadlines needed to make these steps. Several programs exist to help provide structure for this process, breaking it down into term plans or article level goals (e.g. Belcher 2009). Institutions may have access to resources or be able to purchase membership for you with places such as the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. There are also free support resources such as Mirya Holman's Aggressive Winning Scholars newsletter<sup>6</sup> and Raul Pacheco-Vega's Blog.<sup>7</sup> Whichever resources one has access to or prefers to use, the goal should be starting to create a formalized structure for your own expectations of progress.

Finally, we recommend creating informal structures to help reach smaller milestones. Writing groups or retreats (even if just in a conference room on campus for a few hours a day) can help support writing goals. Some writing groups are created with the goal of offering feedback on written work, other writing groups are created to provide community while one navigates writing. Still other groups are simply for goal-setting, checking-in, and act purely as accountability mechanisms for weekly or semi-weekly progress. By making formal the informal, the process of progressing through graduate student research should become more transparent and more focused.

### ***Identifying a network of mentors and supporters***

Ideally, one can choose a graduate program with faculty that they have already identified (and talked to about being) potential mentors. Even in a best-case scenario, where one finds abundant mentorship at their home institution, students should look to expand their networks beyond their home institution. First, graduate school is about learning how to cultivate a network of knowledge and scholars with relevant research interests will be found at many other places. Second, faculty at other institutions can help provide additional knowledge, information, and other types of support. We recommend using all available resources including introductions from mentors or other contacts, organization caucuses (such as the Women and Gender Caucus or any

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<sup>6</sup> <https://miryaholman.substack.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.raulpacheco.org/blog/>

other affiliations you may have),<sup>8</sup> and other networks--particularly those attentive to issues of women (such as WomenAlsoKnowStuff).<sup>9</sup> However, networking can pose particular challenges for women ranging from a lack of representation (e.g. the network explicated in Lazer 2010) to harassment as #MeTooPoliSci details (Brown 2020).

While cultivating relationships, graduate students should also remember to cultivate lateral relationships as well--students in their own program, in other programs at their university, and with students at other universities. These lateral relationships can be useful for building comradery, feedback on early drafts, and writing and accountability groups. For women, these peer support networks can be particularly helpful in providing validation, information, and material support (Macoun and Miller 2014).

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the experience of being in graduate school can be an isolating one--and potentially more so for women. Alter et al. (2020) demonstrate that women “lean in” to the discipline — and sometimes without reward. We hope that our focus and advice on three specific areas of importance — teaching, research, and service— can be a guide for women in any stage of their program. In particular, the advice here is not simply intended to be instructions about how to “lean in” further, but to thrive while the systems that ask women to do and be more are dismantled. Although we hope the advice here affords readers ideas for how to simplify demands, problem solve solutions, and potential ways to cultivate safe and supportive structures that help facilitate success, we acknowledge that background, context, and access to various supports discussed here may differ and recommendations may not be applicable. In parting, we recognize that these suggestions may not be applicable to everyone and the level of support within each program may vary. Like we have discussed, overlapping identities, and axes of marginalization are sure to conflict with and impact the utility and relevance of this advice. Here we say: take what works and leave the rest!

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<sup>8</sup> These affiliations typically also provide funds for travel to and from organizations or funds that can be used for research activities. While these pools of funds are typically small, if universities have matching or separate grant opportunities, combinations may help fund research and conference travel.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.womenalsoknowstuff.com/>

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