Graduate Students Mentoring Graduate Students: A Model for Professional Development

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Our Turn

Editor's Note
This issue of *PS* features the first of a series of short pieces on teaching trends and issues in political science. Items included in these columns will call attention to exemplary initiatives and programs in undergraduate and graduate education that would be useful models for political science faculty and departments. Comments and suggestions for future features are encouraged. For more information, visit www.apsanet.org/teach/teacherfeatures.cfm

In the spring of 2000, the department of political science at the University of Colorado received a Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) grant through the American Political Science Association. Grant funds were used to sponsor discussions about how best to prepare young political scientists to meet their professional and scholarly responsibilities as members of the discipline (see <www.preparing-faculty.org>). A central theme of a recent PFF meeting at Colorado was the importance of mentoring relationships in the process of graduate student education and faculty preparation.

Traditional mentoring involves two players: the graduate student, who needs direction on which steps to take, and an advisor, who provides that direction. Regardless of how well traditional mentoring socializes students into the discipline, graduate students should recognize that many individuals can guide them in their professional development. In particular, fellow students can be invaluable sources of information on how to successfully navigate the steps a faculty advisor directs students to take.

Recognizing this, a group of Colorado graduate students led by Cherie Maestas, Lori Weber, and Nicole Rosmarino formed Mentors of Political Science (MOPS) several years ago. MOPS is a collective organization of senior graduate students who mentor, counsel, and advise junior graduate students on the ins and outs of the department and broader career goals. Over the years, MOPS volunteers have worked to build upon and expand the ways in which graduate students in the department can develop and maintain mentoring relationships with one another. We offer the following brief description of MOPS in the hope that graduate students in other departments will adapt our peer-mentoring model to their specific situations.

The MOPS Model: Some Examples

MOPS was created to reinforce professional development goals communicated to graduate students through the traditional faculty–student relationship, and to provide graduate students with the "how to" information necessary to reach these goals. Beyond casual conversations among graduate students, MOPS achieves this by sponsoring a workshop series in which senior graduate students hold sessions for junior graduate students on topics ranging from writing a grant proposal to surviving comprehensive exams.

One of the most popular MOPS workshops addresses conference participation. Conference participation is an important means for improving research scholarship and networking with other scholars who share similar interests. In our department, students were told this, but left on their own to figure out the logistics of submitting a proposal, putting together a poster or panel presentation, getting funding to participate, and navigating the conference itself. Except when there was active faculty support for conference participation, this "trial by fire" method resulted in a lack of participation in conferences by graduate students.

The MOPS workshop on conference participation is held in the fall semester before the first round of proposal deadlines comes due. In the workshop, we disseminate information about the variety of professional conferences that exist and where and when these conferences are held, give examples of successful conference proposals, offer opportunities for joint graduate student proposals, describe how conferences are organized (e.g., the difference between a panel presentation and a poster presentation), and explain how to request travel funds from the Graduate School and department. By providing these details to fellow graduate students, MOPS volunteers alleviate the intimidating aspects that would otherwise act as an obstacle to their conference participation.

We have found that it is important to keep the MOPS model flexible so that it can meet the varying demands of the graduate students in our department. In response to requests, recent workshop topics included finding nonacademic jobs and publishing in professional journals. These workshops are more than informal discussions. Each workshop participant receives a handout with the information to be discussed. Workshop attendees are encouraged

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to share their handouts with graduate students who could not attend. As an added benefit, these handouts serve as a permanent record and guide to preparing future sessions.

Apart from the workshops, MOPS also sponsors a brown-bag lunch presentation series where graduate students are able to present their research to fellow students. The unique part of this presentation series is that it caters to graduate students at all levels. In fact, our goal in starting this series was to provide the opportunity to begin presenting research early on in one's career, to present research that is not completely polished, and to present in the absence of potentially intimidating faculty. Participating in the brown-bag sessions allows students to receive feedback on their research designs and analysis, to learn about each other's research interests, and to build joint research agendas.

The role graduate students play in mentoring teaching is much more informal and is not part of the MOPS workshop series because the department requires students to take part in two semester-long teaching seminars. However, graduate students supplement and accentuate the course material through individual or small group exchanges. For example, students who are assigned as teaching assistants to a large lecture course see to it that teaching strategies, grading techniques, and recitation syllabi are shared with one another in TA meetings or in the teaching course itself. More senior graduate students, who have the opportunity to teach their own courses, are also active in sharing syllabi and discussing with one another course development, book selection, and dealing with the additional workload involved in being the instructor of record.

We feel MOPS has been successful because it exists within an already established graduate student group, Graduates in Political Science (GIPS). The larger organization maintains continuity across graduate student cohorts, provides a forum in which students can share their concerns and ideas, ensures that students have representation on departmental committees, and generally sees to it that the graduate student voice is heard in the department. GIPS fosters interest in MOPS workshops among the junior graduate students and provides a pool of engaged senior graduate students who can be recruited as MOPS volunteers and who view participation as a service component to their professional development.

Conclusion

While we have had success mentoring one another, we recognize that developing mentoring relationships with faculty members is critical to one's success in graduate school and professional life. No matter what we do as graduate students to help train our junior colleagues, faculty still provide a level of support that we cannot. Every effort should be made by graduate students to encourage quality faculty-student mentoring relationships. For this reason, GIPS recently created an annual award for "Outstanding Graduate Faculty Advisor in Political Science." Recipients are recognized with an engraved plaque that is prominently displayed in the department seminar room. By giving this award, we hope to signal to our faculty that we appreciate and recognize quality mentoring and to encourage them to remain involved in this aspect of graduate education.

We hope that our experiences will serve as a model to graduate students in other departments and encourage them to work within the culture of their department to establish a network of peer mentors and a system of peer-sponsored professional development opportunities. We have found that such efforts can greatly ease students' socialization into the academy of political scientists.

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