

The Graduate Student Caucus: A Model for Peer Support

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ABSTRACT

Graduate students are primarily socialized into the political science profession in departments, with networks of peers and informal mentors providing crucial sources of support. This article describes one model of departmental professional socialization that the authors have led—the Graduate Student Caucus—which can improve graduate students’ day-to-day lived experiences. In this model, a small cross-cohort group of students is elected for a year-long term to develop professional and social programming for graduate students and to assist them in navigating university bureaucracy, teaching and research responsibilities, and the job market. The Caucus also regularly compiles and presents student concerns to their department administrators to steer the program’s direction. We describe the structure of the Caucus and its activities to highlight the benefits of this model and its adaptability to other institutional settings. Governance mechanisms like a Caucus cultivate trust, boost confidence, and demystify the “hidden curriculum” in the profession.

Graduate students rely on various resources to navigate through their doctoral program. In addition to faculty and advisor support, graduate students participate in professional associations and workshops (Bos and Schneider 2012), graduate student unions (Julius and Gumpert 2003), student government, and/or political science Twitter (Ben Hammou and Meehan 2022). However, faculty and advisor support both within and outside of departments can be uneven. As recently as 2015–2016, most PhD-granting departments did not offer a structured mentoring program for doctoral students other than their academic advisor (American Political Science Association 2017, 10). Many political science graduate students believe that mentors also lack the necessary training

to properly support them (Almasri, Read, and Vandeweert 2022). Peer support and informal mentorship can fill some of these gaps.

This article describes the Graduate Student Caucus (hereinafter, the Caucus) that the authors co-developed within our PhD-granting department as a form of department-level graduate student governance. The Caucus improves the doctoral program experience by fostering mutual professionalization, collaboration, counseling, and other support mechanisms. The Caucus also demystifies aspects of the “hidden curriculum” (Windsor and Kronsted 2022) by helping students to learn key professional skills that often are not part of their formal training. All of the authors were the Caucus chair at some point within the past five years, and we provide different perspectives on its development over time.

The Caucus fills roles that are crucial to improving the graduate student experience. These roles include providing better orientation on entry into graduate school, accessing general information about campus resources, organizing professional development workshops, and liaising with departmental administration (Barham and Wood 2022; Coulter, Goin, and Gerard 2004). Formalized peer governance structures such as the Caucus can increase academic, psychological, social, and career learning, as well as address feelings of isolation, burnout, and imposter

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syndrome (Lorenzetti et al. 2019). Participation in the Caucus also allows graduate students to engage in a service opportunity, thereby building skills and distinguishing themselves in a competitive job market. In summary, the Caucus can assist graduate students in navigating their personal and professional development.

Providing resources via a Caucus need not be overwhelming for graduate students. First, we describe the origin, structure, and purpose of the Caucus. Second, we outline the activities under-

representation. If the Caucus does not have at least two women, two people of color, one international student, and one student in at least their fourth year, students may elect an additional representative to serve on the executive committee.² To further accomplish the goal of diverse representation, every political science graduate student is considered a general-body member and can attend meetings. Having a diversity of students represented also spreads the workload of the Caucus across the graduate program;

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taken by the Caucus before highlighting considerations for those interested in creating a Caucus structure in their department. Particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic, we present potential pitfalls or difficulties that we as Caucus chairs have encountered. Third, we conclude by reiterating some of the Caucus's benefits and offer recommendations for other graduate students about replicating and adapting this model.

CAUCUS ORIGINS, STRUCTURE, AND PURPOSE

It is not clear from conversations with senior graduate students when the first version of the Caucus began. Before 2015, it operated as an informal body composed of a small cross-cohort group of students, and it lacked both a clear structure and an explicit purpose. Students randomly were asked by existing members to join the Caucus based on their perceived engagement and fit for the role. Members held infrequent, private meetings, hosted occasional happy hours, and assisted the department in running an open house for prospective students. Disappointed by inconsistent peer-led support and motivated to advocate collectively for graduate students, a group of cohort members decided to establish a Caucus Constitution in 2017.

Today, the Caucus relies on its constitution to structure the group. When the constitution was established in 2017, initial members also agreed on a mission, which then was voted on by all graduate students. The primary mission of the Caucus is “to encourage the development of an intellectual community among graduate students and facilitate student–faculty collaboration beyond the classroom” and “to ensure that the academic and professional needs of students are met” (see online appendix A). Caucus members act as a liaison between all graduate students in our department and departmental administration by raising collective concerns, advocating for graduate student needs, and funneling information more efficiently to the graduate student body.

Because of its primary mission, we found it vital for the Caucus to be composed of students from a range of subfields and backgrounds. For transparency and inclusion purposes, the constitution created four specific service descriptions: (1) a chair to facilitate meetings and to be the main point of contact with administrators; (2) a secretary of policy who ensures that positions are filled and bylaws are upheld; (3) a secretary of programming to facilitate professional and social events; and (4) a representative from each of the department's major subfields to balance perspectives about the program.¹ To account for the diversity of personal experiences in higher education, we included a clause for added

junior scholars must balance the need to create spaces to support others and the need to be supported themselves (Kim, Lebovits, and Shugars 2022).

Students serve in these elected positions for one year, with options to run for multiple terms. This turnover in Caucus members and leadership ensures that a plurality of student perspectives and experiences are represented. Similarly, the chair must have served on the Caucus for one year before serving in the chair position. This requirement further ensures continuity of departmental institutional knowledge and experience in managing Caucus duties. Annual elections are held in April for open positions on the Caucus. The student body nominates candidates for each of the six executive committee positions, and the final selection is determined through a majority vote. Graduate students across cohorts have taken a keen interest in this process, nominating fellow students and actively participating in the final polls. Members' terms run from June to June, which allows current first-year students to run and cultivates cross-cohort participation.

The department and its administrative leaders, including the director of graduate studies (DGS) and the chair, have been supportive of the institutionalization of the Caucus.³ They find that its existence as an autonomous entity absent from faculty oversight fits the department's “DIY nature.” Faculty who have held departmental leadership positions referred to the Caucus as “essential for the DGS and the work of the department,” “an enormous resource for infusing energy and coherence into the PhD program,” and “an important ‘go-to’ source for programmatic activities.” The department also advocated for a dedicated events budget for the Caucus, which enhanced community building across cohorts.⁴

CAUCUS ACTIVITIES

The Caucus engages in a wide array of activities every year to demystify the “hidden curriculum”—the set of required professional skills often not taught in formal graduate training—and to provide access to resources and support. This work builds a sense of community in the department and bridges the gap between graduate students and faculty. These activities as well as the effectiveness of these efforts are described in the following subsections.

Demystifying the “Hidden Curriculum” and Professionalization

The Caucus organizes and implements a series of research presentations, brown bag meetings, professionalization, and methods

workshops, as well as social events throughout the one-year term (see online appendix B). The sessions typically last 90 minutes with a combination of faculty and graduate student panelists who each begin with 10-minute introductory remarks describing their insights. The session is then open for discussion and questions. Other presenters may choose a different presentation format, such as working through example datasets and code with the group.

These topics and events are co-determined with the community using a survey at the beginning of each year and are designed

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to address any thematic areas that may not have been covered by graduate course offerings. Recent workshops have included a diverse range of topics such as text analysis in R, advances in survey methods, how to find and apply for grants, how to prepare an article for journal submission, and how to conduct interviews during COVID-19. The feedback from these workshops has been mostly positive, with students finding the content useful for their research and for mastering the academy’s hidden curriculum. The Caucus budget allocated by the department covers the cost of refreshments at these meetings and workshops.

These sessions build a sense of community within the department by creating space for students and faculty to interact outside of formal seminar settings and by providing opportunities for senior graduate students to connect with and share their experiences with junior students. Some spaces are peer only to provide a “low-stress” environment for graduate students to learn professional norms. Notably, the Graduate Research in Progress workshop is a student-facilitated space for peers to present work at all stages, from two-page proposals to full-length drafts. This format encourages students to seek out research feedback at earlier stages and to learn how to give and receive critiques. Students have used this space to workshop journal submissions, survey instruments, and second-year papers.

The Caucus also uses these sessions to respond to social and cultural movements. For example, after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the Caucus brainstormed ways to incorporate discussions on race and diversity within our field, hosting panels about diversity considerations and positionality in conducting research, in pedagogy, and in the classroom. The Caucus’s position among graduate students, administrators, and faculty was invaluable in facilitating important conversations about biases and awareness with junior and senior scholars at a critical moment.

Another integral role for the Caucus is in the interview process for faculty and graduate students. It coordinates semiformal meetings with job candidates, giving graduate students an opportunity to meet with potential faculty hires. Usually conducted over coffee, these meetings allow graduate students not only to learn more about candidates’ research and academic experience and gain valuable insights into how the job market works but also to enable them to be more engaged in the hiring process. The Caucus also works closely with departmental administrators to organize

an open house for prospective students and to connect potential incoming students with graduate students in their subfield and faculty working in similar areas of research interest.

Community Building and Resource Provision

A key program offered by the Caucus is the mentoring program for incoming graduate students, which pairs new students with senior graduate students. Mentors can answer questions that new graduate students may feel intimidated to ask advisors, and they

provide social peer support in a structured setting. Whereas other departments may rely on faculty to make peer–mentor matches, graduate students know one another best and can make the best match. This program was particularly beneficial when COVID-19 disrupted regular orientation activities, making it more difficult for incoming students to meet with and get to know students from other cohorts in the department. Peer mentors bridge some of this gap and foster a sense of community and connectedness. Both existing and incoming students have expressed great interest in this program: at least half of the incoming cohort usually signs up to be matched with a peer mentor, and the number of volunteers from older cohorts often exceeds this demand. In addition to mentoring, the Caucus organizes a series of social events each year—graffiti tours, basketball games, and (sometimes virtual) happy hours—to provide students the opportunity to take a break and socialize in a more casual setting. These events are mostly free for students to attend and are paid for using the departmental budget allocated for Caucus events.

Additionally, the Caucus creates resource guides to provide institutional knowledge for students. These guides cover topics including how to access physical and mental health care, how to maintain departmental funding and file reimbursement claims, and how to develop a plan of action for the program and navigate departmental paperwork. These guides are updated annually to keep students aware of changes in departmental or university policies. In addition to these guides, the Caucus compiles resources pertaining to successful grant, fellowship, and job-market applications; teaching and pedagogical material; and reference materials from various professionalization and methods workshops. The Caucus maintains an independent Gmail account to house all of these materials in Google Drive and to communicate with graduate students, ensuring continuity across years. The Caucus also circulates information about grants, fellowships, and other funding opportunities that it receives through various listservs and from other graduate students.

Amplifying Graduate-Student Concerns

As a student-led body, the Caucus is better positioned to bring the department’s attention to specific issues that students face or concerns that they share to build a more trusting relationship among graduate students and university and departmental

administrators. The Caucus fulfills this mission in two ways. First, the Caucus annually conducts an anonymous online survey to evaluate the departmental climate, assess how graduate students are feeling, and identify areas for improvement. The online survey garners significant responses across cohorts, and students often provide substantial comments about specific concerns, as well as general feedback about course offerings and their experience as members of the graduate student community.

Students often are more comfortable sharing their concerns with other students—who are more likely to relate to them—rather than departmental administrators and faculty members, partly from concern about reputational costs. This was especially true

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during the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were more forthcoming with Caucus members about concerns related to pandemic fatigue and burnout. The Caucus relayed these concerns to the departmental administrators, helping them to understand the extent of these issues and to develop strategies to better support graduate students. Given the growing evidence of mental health concerns affecting graduate students (Flaherty 2019; Hummel and El Kurd 2021), a Caucus model provides a valuable resource to address these issues.

Similarly, the Caucus successfully amplified student concerns about the second-year-paper requirement, resulting in a recent format change. According to departmental policies at our institution, all second-year graduate students are required to submit a research paper for mock peer review by faculty to jumpstart their original research. Previous cohorts worked independently, without much faculty oversight, and often felt that they lacked the necessary guidance to produce a paper ready for submission to a conference or journal outlet. The Caucus consistently raised this concern with the department; following a series of conversations, the department revised the format and assigned a faculty advisor to each second-year student to help them develop their paper. Faculty also organized a second-year-paper colloquium to help students receive feedback before their final submission.

Second, the Caucus hosts monthly one-hour meetings at the same time and place (or over Zoom) to review old and new business, assist one another in planning and executing various events, and raise and address concerns from students. Graduate students are welcome to attend these open meetings and are given time at the end of the meeting to raise points of discussion with the Caucus members. The chair then meets regularly with departmental administrators (e.g., the chair or the DGS) to convey relevant information from these monthly meetings. In these ways, graduate students serving as Caucus members gain valuable professionalization experience by learning how to organize and coordinate events, lead meetings, and advocate for other students—valuable skills that are easily transferable across departments.

Caucus Buy-In and Effectiveness

Although the effectiveness of the Caucus depends on the department's willingness and capacity to respond to the various challenges that students face, the presence of the Caucus ensures that

these concerns and issues are heard and communicated to the department. Graduate students often acknowledge and appreciate the Caucus's attempts to advocate on their behalf, even when they have been unsuccessful. The active participation of graduate students in Caucus elections; their keen interest in programmatic activities; and their consistent engagement with Caucus members through anonymous surveys, one-on-one meetings, and email exchanges provide evidence of the effectiveness of the Caucus as a model for peer support. Moreover, in cases in which the department has been unable to provide much help, the Caucus can fill this gap by identifying useful resources and fielding recommendations to graduate students.

Faculty members also value different facets of the Caucus's work. They praise its advisory role to the DGS, its advocacy on behalf of graduate students, and its generation of student input on departmental policies. Much of this intermediary work assessing the departmental climate (e.g., raising concerns about mental health and gender issues) and other general liaising often can be intangible, but faculty nevertheless view it as an "invisible success." Faculty leaders identify the Caucus's community building as its most important and visible success due to its professional and social initiatives being key to keeping people "committed and re-energized." Another visible success credited to the Caucus is the recruiting of future graduate students and potential faculty hires.

From this wide-ranging set of activities, including the development of professional and social programming for graduate students, the Caucus assists students in maneuvering through university bureaucracy, teaching and research responsibilities, and navigation of the job market, as well as compiling and presenting student concerns to departmental administrators to steer the program's direction. The Caucus thus serves as a critical resource for improving the day-to-day lived experiences of graduate students.

Considerations for Caucus Development

When developing a graduate student Caucus, considerations that may impact which structure best serves the community include membership, level of departmental support, changing mission, and monetary compensation and budgets. Based on our experience, we offer the following key recommendations (table 1) for those interested in creating their own Caucus model.

Table 1
Key Recommendations for Caucus Development

- Develop a clear mission.
- Ensure inclusivity in caucus structures.
- Design structures to ensure continuity in institutional knowledge.
- Establish consistent channels of communication with departmental administrators.
- Reexamine priorities and "reset" periodically.

When considering potential members, we recommend greater inclusion of student members in Caucus structures. Monthly meetings should be open to the entire graduate student body in the department, ensuring a regular venue at which they are welcome to voice suggestions and frustrations. Anonymous feedback can be solicited on departmental programming and climate via a confidential Google or Qualtrics form. Caucus members should incorporate these insights for its own programming and communicate top-level findings to the graduate student body. Some concerns will be perennial and common across fields (e.g., funding challenges and job-market prospects); others may be more acute relating to specific administrative decisions, course offerings, and qualifying exam standards.

It is possible that Caucus developers lack departmental support for organizing their model. This has the potential for amelioration because the Caucus both sustains institutional knowledge for its peer-graduate students every year and illuminates the graduate student perspective for departmental administrators. This is particularly true for incoming DGSs. Inevitably, they will bring their own approach to the position; however, through consultation with the Caucus chair and other members, expectations for the frequency and quality of DGS–graduate student interactions can carry over across terms. Moreover, a new DGS can solicit Caucus knowledge about trends in programming and graduate student well-being and concerns. Regular communication between a new DGS and the Caucus reduces uncertainty between graduate students and administrators, especially in larger departments and when the DGS is the primary point of contact for students and broader university bureaucratic entities.

We recommend that organizers develop a clear and grounding mission for their Caucus. However, external factors also may prompt the Caucus to periodically reexamine its priorities and to alter or expand its goals. For example, the spread of COVID-19 fundamentally altered the way in which departmental, classroom, and cross-cohort interactions took place. The absence of face-to-face meetings and in-person interactions eliminated opportunities for informal socializing before activities (e.g., pseudo “water-cooler” conversations and connections among faculty and graduate students). In response, the Caucus worked to maintain community building for graduate students using video-conferencing technology during the pandemic. Although platforms such as Webex and Zoom enabled us to interact with one another, our professional and social activities needed to be more engaging and shortened to ensure participation and to guard against burnout. Nevertheless, the Caucus was not immune to the impacts of COVID-19. Attrition in annual survey responses and nominations for Caucus elections this year suggest a need to “reset” and revitalize the institution.

Finally, curating and updating the Caucus’s institutional knowledge and overseeing programming gives graduate students the opportunity to serve both their department and their peers. Ideally, Caucus members are compensated for their work by the department or the university. This can be through direct one-time payments to student organizers, reimbursements to organizers for reasonable costs incurred while running events, or small additions to the monthly stipend and/or salary received by organizers. Departmental administrators also could advocate for a small annual budget to offset any programming and event

costs. If monetary compensation is not possible, departments alternatively could adjust service expectations for Caucus members.

CONCLUSION

In summary, graduate students often are key resources for helping their peers navigate through graduate school. University bureaucracy changes, faculty move to other institutions, specific courses are not available, and the hidden curriculum frustrates their progress along with equity and inclusion objectives (Barham and Wood 2022). A Caucus is one way to cultivate an environment in which graduate students can succeed. It is a straightforward model that can be replicated and modified across institutions according to existing structures and the community’s needs. When forming their own governance body, we suggest that graduate students examine other models, such as Graduates in Political Science and Mentors of Political Science at the University of Colorado, Boulder (2022) and the Graduate Student Life Committee at the University of Minnesota (2022). We hope that graduate students find our experience and insight useful as they develop their own caucus.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000798>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Within the department, major fields of study include American politics, comparative politics, and international relations. In constructing the Caucus, we chose not to include structured representation for minor fields (i.e., public policy, political theory, and methods) due to our department’s size.
2. These specific identities were selected because of the composition of the department’s graduate students, but they can be adapted over time and per department. For example, a department with a substantial influence of student veterans may want to ensure their representation.
3. The authors collected feedback on the Caucus’s work, its evolution, and its relationship to the department from faculty who are serving or recently served as the DGS or department chair.
4. Budget constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily suspended these funds.

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