

# Young Scholars Development Program

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I would like to take the opportunity to highlight some new initiatives to foster research by emerging scholars—late-stage PhD students and new PhDs, in particular. The *State and Local Government Review's* Young Scholars Research Outreach Program ([http://slg.sagepub.com/site/includefiles/SLGR\\_Young\\_Scholars.pdf](http://slg.sagepub.com/site/includefiles/SLGR_Young_Scholars.pdf)) and the *Journal of Urban Affairs'* Scholar Development Program (<http://urbanaffairsassociation.org/2015/06/03/journal-of-urban-affairs-scholar-development-program/>) are cases in point. The purpose of both programs is to support the research of new scholars via mentorship by more senior ones. In some ways, the review process is similar to a traditional blind review but is more effective for junior scholars in several respects: (1) there is a reduced expectation that the paper will be “perfect” on the first try; (2) reviewers/mentors are generally affiliated with the journal in some way as editors or members of the editorial board and hence have a commitment to the process; (3) reviewers/mentors understand that the purpose of the program is to assist the new scholars by providing constructive criticism in a tone and manner that is meant to be helpful rather than judgmental; and (4) developing scholars will not live under the threat of a rejection; comments might be critical but revisions will be possible and/or recommendations for more appropriate publication outlets provided. This does not mean that critiques are sugar-coated; rather, the level of detail, direction, and suggestions should be in greater depth and in a tone that is supportive.

From the standpoint of journal editors, the daunting calculus of increasing numbers of submissions but a fixed publication space means that desk rejection rates are typically very high so as not to overburden the reviewer base. Programs that improve the quality and appropriateness of submitted papers help address these issues. From the perspective of a first time scholar, the journal submission process can be intimidating, particularly given the imperative to publish. I well remember looking at my first set of rejection letters; the comment: “well written but inherently uninteresting” sticks in my mind. Anything that editors and senior scholars can do to increase the quality of submitted papers while also supporting the scholars and scholarship of the future is extremely valuable. This is where scholar development programs come in. They provide clear benefits to the developing scholars, the more senior faculty that act as mentors, and to the future of scholarship in state, local, urban, and intergovernmental affairs. Many of the central benefits are listed below:

**Benefits to developing scholars:** these benefits are the most obvious.

- The opportunity to improve their research through the input of senior scholars
- An opportunity to get feedback separate from the often soul-bruising process of journal review
- The chance to revise papers for a specific journal, thus enhancing the potential of publication
- The opportunity to learn lessons about research and article construction that can be applied to future papers

- The exposure to perspectives that may differ from their professors and dissertation committee members
- The potential for long-term collegial relationships with senior scholars apart from their dissertation committee members

**Benefits to mentors:** While the benefits to the scholar mentors may not seem as obvious, the bottom line is that it's our job—indeed one of the most important aspects of our job.

- The opportunity to give back professionally to the field in a way that goes beyond a line item for an annual activity report. Rather, it's a chance to really touch the professional life of a junior scholar in a way that can have long-lasting benefits.
- An opportunity to pay it backward, to honor the mentors that helped us along the way
- A chance to ensure that new scholars have the mentorship we lacked, depending on our circumstances starting out in our careers.
- An opportunity to pay it forward because the developing scholars that receive support now are more likely to be the senior scholars that provide it in the future
- The opportunity to be exposed to new research and methodological trends and reflect on how that might inform our own work
- The potential for the development of long-term collegial relationships with new scholars

**Benefits to the field:** improving the work of new scholars offers many tangible benefits to the field of state, local, urban, and intergovernmental affairs.

- The outcome of improving journal submissions, decreasing desk rejection rates, and ensuring that an often overburdened reviewer pool is reading high quality work
- The publication of higher quality papers contributing to the all-important journal impact factor
- The development of the future of state, local, urban, and intergovernmental scholars
- A transfusion of new ideas and methodologies into the field
- The opportunity to develop a group of junior scholars with a loyalty to a particular journal that provided support, which should pay off in future high quality submissions

## Logistics of the Program

The two journals initiated their programs for several reasons. First, the Urban Affairs Association has started running special training and workshop programs for new scholars as part of their annual meeting. The Scholar Development program was part of the larger dialogue between senior and junior scholars about what sort of support would be most valuable to new scholars as

they start their careers. Discussions at “how to publish” panels at professional conferences also highlighted the needs of junior scholars for more support in transitioning from their dissertations to their first published articles. The other impetus was recognition by the editors of the journals that many submissions were inherently interesting but were not presented in such a way as to be successful in the review process. This is particularly the case for papers from international scholars with different research training and traditions. Based on these conversations and issues, the journal editorial boards were very supportive of proposals to initiate the scholar development programs. Information about the programs has been promulgated at professional conferences, junior scholar, and other mentoring workshops and panels, on the journal websites, and in e-mail blasts to the members of the Urban Affairs Association. Future plans include targeting specific audiences of scholars via presentations by the editors and editorial board members at international conferences, e-mails to PhD program directors, and contacting the organized sections and other constituent groups of professional organizations, such as the American Political Science Association, that support diverse and junior scholars.

Participation in the programs by junior scholars has been averaging about 20 mentees per year. While higher numbers would be desirable on the one hand, the volume must be balanced by the time constraints of the editorial boards that act as mentors. Because two board members review each paper, the current submission rate requires the time of 40 mentors. The *Journal of Urban Affairs* has addressed the workload in part by enlarging the editorial board so that no individual reviews more than one paper per year. Other options currently being considered are inviting senior scholars in the Urban Affairs Association to assist in reviewing manuscripts. At the *JUA*, submissions for the scholar development program do not go through the regular review process, but rather are sent directly to the program director. This allows for a more informal and hopefully less intimidating process of mentoring than the formal submission process would imply. This also ensures that the scholar development papers are not counted in the overall journal submission data until the point at which they would be formally submitted. *State and Local Government*

*Review* uses the regular submission process so that manuscripts can be formally tracked. Options can differ based on the preferences and processes of each journal.

At this point only a small number of papers submitted to the scholar development program at the *JUA* have been formally submitted for review; however, the success rate of the handful that have is high and several have been accepted for publication. The editors have not tried to track potential submissions to other journals but improving the tracking system to do so would be desirable. In addition to improved tracking and outreach, several other program changes/improvements are being considered based on the early experiences with the programs. Increasing numbers of submissions have been received from undergraduate or early graduate level students. These tend not to be of publishable quality and program language is being changed to clarify that the program is only open to PhD students near the end of their degrees and early career scholars. As submissions to US journals have internationalized, issues of the English quality of the writing have arisen at all journals. The scholar development programs also have these challenges so including links to editing programs or services would be useful. Finally, getting timely reviews from mentors is always an issue. Incentives or expectations for review times need to be clarified to ensure that junior scholars are getting responses in a timeframe that allows them to move on with their projects.

### Summary

In short, participating in scholar development programs as a senior scholar has many benefits both tangible (noted above) and intangible (being able to assist a new scholar just feels good). At a minimum, participation in a scholar development program for the mentor involves reading, perhaps in more than one iteration, new research and providing helpful comments and critiques. Done really well, the senior scholar role might also include some give-and-take with the new scholar over a period of time. Participation by new scholars can mean a foothold in an increasingly competitive publishing field. Either way, scholar development programs are a win-win for scholars at all stages and the journals on which they rely. In the interests of the future of our fields, I encourage everyone to participate. ■