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Professional Norms: Clearing a Barrier to Developing Meaningful Relationships

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What You Need to Know

The academy and political science as a field are becoming more diverse and are taking actions to extend opportunities to historically under-represented groups. These changes promise to be a benefit to these groups as well as the discipline as a whole, but realizing those benefits depends upon graduate student socialization to the professional norms of political science. Moreover, regardless of your background, familiarity with professional norms is a competency that is essential to your success as a graduate student and professional political scientist. While norms may change to meet new circumstances and societal expectations, knowing how to conduct yourself appropriately in various professional circumstances clears the way for building meaningful relationships that will serve you well in professional pursuits. Encountering new and often unspoken norms may be daunting, but if one approaches the process of socialization into these norms as an active participant, professional interaction will become easier and more likely to lead to the cultivation of a collegial network that will be essential for your continued success.

Encountering norms with which one might be unfamiliar can be daunting and may contribute to a variety of negative feelings, but this unease should not be taken as a sign that one does not “belong” in the academic community. *Impostor syndrome* (the notion that individual achievements are undeserved or owe to luck) is widespread and may be detrimental to success in graduate school (Fernandez et al 2019). Moreover, these feelings and their consequences are most acutely felt by students from historically under-represented groups insofar as they may experience the navigation of these norms differently even within the same institutional environment as others (APSA 2011; Chrousos and Mentis 2020; Tormos-Aponte and Velez-Serrano 2019). Although student experiences will vary, some uneasiness is common and not an indication that you do not belong in the academy. (See chapter 50 for more advice on impostor syndrome.)

As you continue in your career as a graduate student and professional political scientist, you will encounter a variety of different people and, sometimes, will interact with those who do not adhere to the expectations of professional norms. Some people will not be respectful of different views, others may harbor prejudices toward female or minoritized individuals, and others may just be bad colleagues who require frequent prodding to do their job. The purpose of long-standing professional norms is to promote functionality and meritocracy while generally supporting a collegial atmosphere. As with any other profession, however, political science does not always live up to the expectations that we set for ourselves as professionals and human beings. We can, and must, do better because it is the right thing

to do. Improving the professional atmosphere in which we operate is, however, inextricably tied to each of our individual behavior. The best way to create the environment in which we prefer to work is to learn and to embody norms that support inclusivity, respect for individual and intellectual diversity, and personal accountability.

Why It Matters

Like any profession, political science has norms that are vital to heed if you wish to be successful. Following professional norms is important, for example, for working successfully with faculty members (Benesh 2001), writing and defending a dissertation (Wuffle 1989), publishing in academic journals and presses (Cohen 2002), and navigating the job market (Hanley 2008). Of particular importance for the discussion that follows is that learning and practicing professional norms helps build and sustain academic relationships in your department and field that will be indispensable on your path to professional success (Gardner 2008; Kim, Lebovits, and Shugars 2021; Weidman and Stein 2003).

Awareness of professional norms is important and should be taken seriously from the earliest days in a graduate program. Not only will beginning to socialize yourselves into professional modes of conduct contribute to your future success, but transgressing these norms (even unknowingly) may also undermine your professional aspirations. The sheer variety of interactions you will encounter mean that this chapter cannot be comprehensive.¹ Rather, we intend for it to serve as a starting point and we encourage graduate students to seek out peer and faculty mentors who can help them along the way. Choose your mentors wisely, for as in any profession not all individuals rise to expectations. Find those whose behavior supports professional, collegial, and meritocratic standards of excellence and seek to learn and model that behavior so that we can continue to shape the profession into what we all want it to be.

What You Can Do

In this section we address concrete ways which you might prepare for professional interactions as a political science graduate student, and offer suggestions for how to turn those interactions into meaningful professional relationships. Since professional norms are applicable in such a wide variety of interactions, the authors are unable to address everything and have, instead, chosen to highlight a few different areas of your professional interactions. In each of these subsections, we try to provide concrete recommendations for appropriate behavior that may be understood to communicate an underlying principle that will manifest in a variety of different areas and ways. We begin with a section that is generally applicable and addresses your *personal comportment* and image. We then move into particular interactions to provide rough guidelines for *professional conduct* in specific situations.

Self-Presentation and Comportment

You are no longer an undergraduate student and are now beginning on a path toward being a political science professional. Whether you have experience in the workplace and are returning to graduate school, or are just out of your undergraduate program, the transition to being a professional in the academy requires a change of mindset toward active learning, engagement, consideration about how you appear to others, and holding yourself responsible for embodying professional norms.

This turn toward actively engaged professionalism begins in its most outward manifestation with your appearance. Although only a part of who we are, how you look is the first impression you give to others. Dress appropriately for the situation. In classes and meetings, be clean, neat, and composed. Other events (e.g. academic conferences) may require professional business attire (usually a business suit). (See chapter 21 for more advice on how to participate in conferences most effectively.) If you are uncertain about what the appropriate attire is for a particular event, err on the side of being “overdressed.” We all want to be “authentic” and often choose to represent ourselves outwardly in our clothing choices, but it is generally best to dress relatively conservatively so that our intellectual and professional merit stand

out to others rather than our appearance.

In your disposition and behavior, focus on cultivating a social environment that is civil and respectful. Avoid cursing, being unnecessarily aggressive, and acting in a manner that is overly familiar. You may develop relationships where different behavioral patterns are entirely acceptable to all parties, but begin each professional relationship by putting your best foot forward. Particular individuals have different personalities and comfort levels with different modes of behavior, and you should respect these. The mark of professionalism is to meet each new person on a common and generally acceptable ground. There are a variety of norms which are perhaps best captured in their principle rather than in particulars. The above social traits are examples, as are other broad notions: punctuality, respect for others' time and attention, being prepared, and so on. The particular manifestations of general principles are too much to be addressed here but in the sections that follow we endeavor to provide some clear suggestions for how to put these (and other) general principles into practice.

In Your Department and University

The life of the professional entails frequent communication, meeting deadlines, and participation in a variety of different types of meetings. Keep track of deadlines and meet or exceed them. As a professional norm, being timely or punctual not only demonstrates that you have respect for others' time, but it also benefits you. Whether you are engaged in a research project or doing committee work, frequent and prompt communication, meeting deadlines, and general punctuality helps build a good reputation as a scholar and a colleague. As a matter of organizational function, punctuality is a necessary component for the successful completion of large-scale projects, which often involve contingencies. The Registrar, for example, cannot process student grades until you have submitted them, and students are often dependent upon the processing of their grades to qualify for university athletics or scholarships. As a general rule, complete your work (whatever it is) on time or early, and keep in mind that delays in your work often makes more work for others. Just as being timely helps you develop a positive reputation that will serve you well, developing a reputation for not completing work on time can be a barrier to healthy and meaningful relationships that you need to build for your own professional success.

Despite our best efforts to manage our time and be mindful of others, however, sometimes exigent circumstances arise that prevent us from delivering on promises. In cases like these, you should turn to clear communication—inform those who need to know about the delay, and take on responsibility by suggesting solutions or outlining an adjusted timetable. Especially in situations like these, the honesty of our communication with one another is important. If, for example, you know that a project will take you a week to accomplish because of other obligations you have, do not suggest that you can complete it sooner; promising prompt turn-around is only a benefit if you can keep those promises. Honest and clear communication combined with taking responsibility to meet reasonable expectations treats others with respect at least insofar as it allows them to plan and manage their time according to their needs. These principles apply in all sorts of interactions in your professional life—from coursework with fellow students to book projects you may eventually undertake with co-authors.

The academic department is more than just an administrative subunit of the university. It has a life and culture of its own and may offer a great variety of programming for graduate students. Get involved in the social and intellectual life of your department by attending invited lectures, job talks, university-wide events, and the like. By participating and contributing to the vitality of your department, you begin to contribute to the maintenance of an active and engaging (and collegial) departmental culture that supports education and social responsibility. Without active engagement, these programs are often for naught. The same is true outside of your department as well. In professional organizations, for example, you should consider signing up for and participating in special "sections" or attending symposia in order to begin to develop what Kim, Lebovits, and Shugars (2021) call a "knowledge-based family." These connections not only help to support the profession but also begin to build a lively personal network that will help you succeed professionally. (Chapters 31 and 32 provide suggestions for department and disciplinary service activities you might consider undertaking while still a graduate student.)

Do be mindful, however, that you do not overextend yourself, as "burnout" is a real risk and participating in more activities than you have time to do successfully will inevitably lead to delays in meeting

deadlines. Whenever we participate in events, we want our participation to be quality participation. Quality participation begins with being on time and prepared for the event, and preparation takes time. Your arrival should be punctual and you should be prepared to engage as a professional. When others are speaking, listen carefully and take notes so that when it is your turn to speak you may do so meaningfully and constructively. Be patient and do not speak over others. Comments or questions should not be aggressive or accusatory, and questions should come from a place of genuine and honest interest. Seek to build academic relationships with people, not to “compete” with them.

Lastly, the time that you spend with fellow graduate students will (hopefully) involve a lot of more informal interaction as well. In fact, the further you progress into the profession the more opportunities for informal interactions you will come across. With informal situations, especially where food and alcohol are present, it bears mentioning that it can sometimes be challenging to distinguish “between friendly social behavior that is appropriate [...] and sexual harassment” (Sapiro and Campbell 2018, 6). If you find that another has transgressed acceptable norms in this way, consult with a trusted adviser, your institution’s Title IX office, and/or APSA’s ombudsperson. Likewise, it is incumbent upon each of us to be especially mindful that we maintain the level of professionalism and respect that supports collegiality and the comfort of all individuals involved—even in informal situations. (For more clarity on what constitutes discrimination and harassment, as well as how to respond appropriately to these types of situations, see chapters 51 and 52).

With Faculty and Advisers

The life of a faculty member is one that is marked by a variety of different interests and obligations that pull them in multiple directions. As a graduate student (and even as a professional), that can sometimes make your interactions with faculty members frustrating or unclear. The best way to navigate this environment is to take responsibility for what you do have control over and to be responsive and direct. If you receive an email, respond to it promptly and clearly²—even if only to say that a full and proper response is forthcoming within a specified time frame. While norms establish expectations that help guide our behavior, establishing what others might expect of us (and when they might expect it) is equally important. You should also keep your own records of what has been submitted when, when meetings are or need to be scheduled, and what suggestions or advice has been offered as well as about what commitments you have made. Keep a calendar and be proactive.

As any other professional, you should be respectful of faculty and your advisers’ time, but being respectful does not mean being subservient or meek. Remember that your advisers are there to help you develop as a professional and a scholar. If you have questions or concerns—whether about course material, programmatic requirements, or professional expectations—you should seek out the advice and guidance of trusted advisers. You can—and should—assert yourself as you take responsibility for your development and growth as a professional, but doing so should be performed in a manner appropriate to professional interactions. Selecting an adviser with whom you work well is also important, and you should work together to develop clear expectations about how your individual relationship will work.

With Undergraduate Students

Developing a rapport with undergraduate students is essential, for your professional career as a political scientist will inevitably involve significant amounts of interaction with undergraduates. Perhaps more than anything else, beginning to develop the mode in which you will interact with undergraduates early on in your graduate student career will serve you well. The sort of rapport you keep with undergraduates significantly depends not only on your own personality but also the culture of your institution and the backgrounds of the students. Remember that you are no longer an undergraduate and that your behavior with respect to undergraduates should reflect that. Though it should be obvious it bears mentioning that you should not attend undergraduate parties, for example, and you should certainly not engage in anything that might be construed as inappropriate. Being a professional does not need to mean being “stuffy,” but it does mean embodying propriety in speech and actions.

Whether you have realized it yet or not, you are in a position of authority with respect to un-

dergraduates and that authority also implies responsibility. Being in a position of authority does not, however, necessitate that you be commanding or dictatorial. Finding the line between being approachable and understanding, on the one hand, and authoritative, on the other hand, can be difficult. Begin to figure this out now. Your authority is based on your position and knowledge, but that position also entails a responsibility for teaching and mentoring undergraduates on their path to life after graduation. Whatever balance you strike or approach you take to these interactions, the principles that are supported by professional norms should be foremost in your mind: collegiality, understanding, meritocracy, and respect. One of the best things that you can do is to observe faculty members to learn from their approach to interacting with students. See what works and what does not, and how you can begin to cultivate your own approach based on your observations and a self-assessment.

In Outside Interactions

As a professional, you represent not only yourself when dealing with individuals outside of your program, but you also represent your program and advisers. These interactions (e.g., academic conferences, invited talks) provide an excellent opportunity to cultivate a professional network, but it is common to feel somewhat anxious about interacting with strangers. What should you talk about? What should you avoid talking about? Whatever your comfort level with social interaction, it is a mistake to think of networking as “waiting to be invited.” Think of networking as an exercise in actively building a community that consists of “horizontal” relationships with those who share similar experiences and “vertical” relationships with those who are at different stages of their career but share interests (Kim, Lebovits, and Shugars 2021). Cultivating both types of relationship is essential for building a well-rounded network of scholars to whom you might turn for letters of recommendation, research collaboration, professional development, and various kinds of support.

Lastly, since building relationships involves connecting with other people, graduate students should be prepared to talk about themselves. For advanced graduate students, this will usually mean having an “elevator pitch” that describes their dissertation and current research. Although new graduate students may not yet have a clear research agenda, you should be prepared to briefly describe your interests. Having a concise description of your interests will be essential for building a network of peers and future colleagues who will be able to help you grow and advance as a professional.

Conclusion

Successfully learning and adhering to the discipline’s professional norms will serve you well by helping you feel comfortable in the academy and clearing the way to the development of meaningful professional relationships that will serve your *career ambitions*. Adherence to professional norms of conduct does not require that you become anyone other than who you are, nor does it mean that you must conceal your background or individuality. On the contrary, heeding professional norms allows you to be yourself and to bring all you have to offer to the table in a manner that does not inadvertently conceal you behind negative impressions. Of course, not all interactions will be perfect or even positive. Be mindful of others, but also charitable when others fall short. Reflect on individual interactions so that you can continue to grow as a professional as you pursue your professional ambitions with confidence.

Endnotes

- 1 Although there is a great deal of uniformity in the professional norms of political science, there are slight variations in norms by sub-field, region, and university type (research universities v. liberal arts colleges), for example.
- 2 Prompt and clear responses to email or phone calls is a norm that should be followed in all professional interactions.

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