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Teaching as an International Graduate Student

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the unique challenges *international graduate students* of political science face as teaching assistants and/or instructors. A non-teaching path towards a graduate degree may not be an option for many international graduate students due to financial obligations and/or other disadvantages. Hence being aware of the material and non-material gains as well as challenges of teaching whilst working on a dissertation is crucial for international graduate students to be able to establish a healthy balance between teaching and research. This chapter outlines these gains and challenges and provides a roadmap for international graduate students on how to overcome such challenges whilst making successful progress towards their dissertation research. It also discusses the ways in which *teaching experience* offers a competitive advantage in their future academic endeavors.

Studying in another country as an international student expands one's perspective—both professionally and personally—and is useful especially for those working in the discipline of political science. Experiencing everyday life in another country broadens one's understanding of politics and how it disseminates into everyday practices, especially when one is an “alien.” Although this comes with a set of challenges, the benefits can outweigh these challenges if students create a plan to pursue potential academic and financial resources available for them prior to the start of their program.

Gains and Challenges

Research shows that an increasing number of international students are seeking degrees in the United States and these students can experience difficulties stemming from a variety of factors including language barriers, academic differences, resource allocation, and finding support within their communities (Rodríguez et al. 2019). Among these, securing continuous and stable funding for graduate studies is one of the greatest concerns for international students since—due to visa restrictions—they are only allowed to work within the campus. In addition, some fellowships and scholarships require that the applicants hold US citizenship or permanent residency.

In 2021, the primary source of funding for 53% of international graduate students in the United States was personal and family resources (IIE 2021). For many other students, such resources may not be available, especially depending on the countries the students come from. For example, students who come from the countries in the global south will largely not have the opportunities those from the global north may have. This is reflected in the fact that in 2021, 40.2% of international graduate students relied on US college or university funds to pay for their studies (IIE 2021).

Graduate assistantships are among the few financial resources available to graduate students. These

assistantships usually come with a full or partial tuition waiver as well as a monthly stipend. However, they are also highly competitive positions, and may come with certain restrictions depending on the institution's and/or departments' internal rules and regulations. For example, graduate students may be allowed to be a graduate assistant only for a limited number of years (e.g., 3 years in total) in one department/program. In that case, students must figure out how to fund the remainder of their time in the graduate program with fellowships and/or scholarships or find another graduate assistantship in another department/program.

There are a few other options for political science graduate students—aside from their home departments. They can also work in other social sciences or humanities departments as well as at the research centers within the university, depending on their research interests and availability. Hence, incoming international students can benefit from seeking advice from their potential adviser or the international student services office before starting the program. This would enable them to learn about the funding opportunities offered by the graduate program as well as the conditions of these opportunities such as, what sorts of expenses can be covered, for how long students would be eligible for financial support, and what other funding and employment opportunities are available for international graduate students on campus.

Gains

Working as a graduate assistant is advantageous for international students for several reasons. First of all, with a tuition waiver, students do not have to pay the out-of-state tuition fees, which are much higher than the in-state tuition fees. Second, students generally receive a stipend that helps cover their living expenses—at least partially. Also, depending on the institution, graduate assistants may be eligible for affordable on-campus housing. In addition, these assistantships come with health insurance, which otherwise may be another out-of-pocket expense for international students.

Aside from these material gains, serving as a graduate assistant also allows students to gain an “insider” look into academia. This is useful for realizing future career goals, especially for those considering entering the academic job market in the U.S. In this context, working as a graduate teaching assistant allows international students to become familiar with professional work etiquette across different levels by working with faculty and administrative personnel. As students apply for assistantships in different departments and research centers, they also gain experience in preparing applications for academic jobs and interviews—a valuable investment toward the job market.

Depending on the program and institution, as a graduate assistant you may or may not be required to teach a course as the sole instructor or assist faculty with teaching. As a teaching assistant, you will likely be responsible for grading assignments and exams, as well as meeting with students during office hours to discuss their progress and/or answer their questions regarding the course. You may also teach a few sessions as a guest lecturer. As a sole instructor, you will likely create your own syllabus and plan lectures, in addition to holding office hours and grading assignments (see chapter 28 in this volume for more on teaching assistantships).

You may be able to teach courses as a lecturer on a semester basis, otherwise known as being an adjunct or non-tenure track faculty member (see chapter 44 in this volume for more on adjunct teaching). These lectureships are different from graduate assistantships and applications are usually accepted on a semester basis. Meaning, these positions—and their associated funding streams—are not guaranteed for every semester owing to their competitiveness as well as departmental resources, demand for courses, and availability of funds. These lectureships do not come with health insurance and other benefits, so it is better to make sure you have a teaching or research assistantship whilst you can teach an additional course as an adjunct lecturer—either in your home department or in another department. This way, you can both gain teaching experience and make sure you have financial security and access to healthcare during your graduate studies. However, before committing to teaching more than one course per semester, it would be better to have completed any course work and, ideally, have passed your comprehensive exams. This way, you can manage your time more efficiently between teaching commitments and writing your dissertation (see chapter 17 in this volume for more on time management).

Challenges

It is also important to acknowledge the challenges international graduate students face while teaching. One challenge is that anything they may say can trigger controversy, especially because they may be seen as “outsiders” to discuss the political issues of the country where they teach. For example, if you are teaching American politics in the United States, you may face the threat of “callout” or “cancel culture,” which can be described as “the desire to publicly shame and silence the offender” (Rom and Mitchell 2021), and consequently practice self-censure in order not to discuss potentially controversial topics even if they are essential to your course content. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain the classroom as a safe space for both the instructor and the students to share their thoughts on the course material and engage in constructive critique. In this regard, a useful pedagogical approach would be ensuring that not only multiple views on one issue are welcome “but also that multiple issues can be brought into discussion, even when those issues may be more important to one side of the political spectrum than the other” (Rom and Mitchell 2021). Using cases, narratives, and examples from disagreeing parties on a political issue can help encourage students to engage in dialogue rather than being defensive or aversive in expressing their thoughts. In addition, international graduate students can utilize the advantage of discussing similar political issues in their home country in a comparative perspective to expand students’ understanding of politics, not as citizens of a particular country but as students of political science.

Given all the challenges graduate students face, it is not surprising that a recent study has revealed how political science graduate students are having “far worse mental health than other populations across a range of outcomes” (Almasri et al. 2021). One aspect of the study asked whether any aspect of the participants’ identity or background made it difficult for them to feel supported, both professionally and personally, and found that 7% of the participants mentioned their “international status” affected this. This combination of being an international student and pursuing a graduate degree can exacerbate the already stressful academic experiences (see chapters 35, 64, and 68 in this volume for more mental health topics).

Making the Most of Your Teaching Experience

Teaching whilst working on your doctoral degree in political science can be both rewarding and challenging. In addition to financial security, students should seek a healthy balance between their research and teaching. This is easier said than done, but here are a few tips that may be helpful in finding that balance. Firstly, and most importantly, you should designate time slots to solely focus on your dissertation. During these slots, make sure not to check your emails or think about work that is associated with your teaching role. Keep in mind that, although teaching may provide you with financial resources and experience, without finishing your dissertation, you cannot receive your degree. It may be hard to focus on writing on the days you teach as all your energy goes into delivering the lecture, facilitating discussions, and answering questions. These days, instead of writing, it may be more productive to work on the following week’s lecture, assignments, grading, and hold office hours. On the remaining weekdays, you can focus on your research and writing your dissertation (see chapter 17 in this volume for additional advice on time management).

Another useful strategy is finding ways to incorporate your research into your teaching. You may not be given the opportunity to choose a specific course to teach that completely overlaps with your research. However, whenever possible, you can draw on your research materials and assign these for your course. In addition, having writing workshops and retreats with students would not only allow you to work on your dissertation as part of your teaching role but also help your students improve their writing skills through peer reviews and constructive feedback.

It is crucial to have peer support groups where you can share your teaching “moments” with other graduate assistants as well as strategies to teach controversial topics, improve time management, and spare time for self-care or leisure activities. Peer support can be helpful in relieving stress and easing the feeling of isolation international students may face. Although teaching while writing your dissertation

is often time consuming, it is important to make time for these social gatherings in order to sustain a healthy academic and personal environment (see chapter 63 in this volume for additional advice on finding your collective).

As an international graduate assistant and/or instructor, you will have endured many hardships and challenges by the end of your program. That being said, you will also have gained valuable experience not only in teaching but in other aspects of academic life, such as establishing professional relationships with faculty and other academic personnel, implementing pedagogical strategies, presenting your work and responding to questions related to it, to name a few. These experiences will be useful during your academic job search at the end of your program. Being able to draw upon your experiences and exchanges with your students in your teaching philosophy statement, rather than merely theoretical pedagogical strategies, will be noted by selection committees alongside your broader understanding of cultural differences and how to reconcile these differences within a constructive academic environment. Given that about half of the academic political scientists in the United States work in teaching institutions that do not offer doctoral programs (Hill 2021), teaching experience can help international candidates be more competitive on the job market. For more information about preparing for your first teaching experience, see chapter 29 in this volume.

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