

1 Nevertheless, We Persisted: Pathways Through Grad School

Kevin G. Lorentz II¹, Daniel J. Mallinson², Julia Marin Hellwege³,
Davin L. Phoenix⁴, & J. Cherie Strachan⁵

1. Saginaw Valley State University 2. Penn State Harrisburg

3. University of South Dakota 4. University of California, Irvine 5. The University of Akron

Graduate school is often a new and daunting venture for students. Concepts unique to graduate school such as a “comprehensive exam,” “probationary status,” or even the Dean of Graduate Studies might be unfamiliar to some graduate students. It is important to recognize that not every student enters graduate school with the same level of academic cultural capital—the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills that demonstrate social status and cultural competence (Bourdieu 1973).

Research has found that some demographics are more likely to have academic cultural capital when it comes to graduate education—namely white, male students born to at least one parent with a graduate degree. These students begin graduate school better equipped to deal with its challenges because of accumulated social, financial, and cultural resources. First generation and minoritized students often have lower, if any, cultural capital, and therefore face greater obstacles to success (Gardner and Holley 2011; Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez 2011; Holley and Gardner 2012).

A major advantage of cultural capital is greater awareness of the vast hidden curriculum in graduate school. Without cultural capital, it can be easy for students to become lost in the face of a new, high-stakes, graduate-level environment. This edited volume will help students to uncover the hidden curriculum of graduate school and provides the resources necessary for students to navigate it.

Our volume owes gratitude to Jessica McCrory Calarco’s book *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*, a review of which inspired this project (Mallinson 2022). The idea for this volume emerged, as projects often do, with a conversation between colleagues. Cherie Strachan was serving her final year as reviews editor for the *Journal of Political Science Education* when Dan Mallinson submitted his review of Calarco’s book. Dan and Cherie emailed back and forth about how helpful her volume was, as well as how they wished such a resource had been available back when they entered graduate school. As the pair had been, respectively, a female student and a first-generation student, they had faced implicit bias and discrimination that they had not anticipated and had not been prepared to handle.

After several exchanges, Dan and Cherie zeroed in on how they might improve upon Calarco’s slim volume based on their own experiences. First, they thought students would benefit from a more in-depth guide specifically tailored to the discipline of political science. Second, they realized that the distinct experiences and needs of minoritized, first-gen, and women students in our discipline are not addressed enough in current discourse. These two realizations inspired this volume in the interest of providing an important service to all of our future colleagues, but also in helping to recruit and retain a more diverse array of students into political science graduate programs. Political science has a well-documented problem with retention of women and minoritized faculty linked to the pernicious “hidden curriculum” as well as structural problems in the discipline and higher education (Bates, Jenkins, and Pflaeger 2012; Bos, Sweet-Cushman, and Schneider 2019; Brown et al. 2020; Crawford and Windsor

2021; Mitchell and Hesli 2013; Lavariega Monforti and Michelson 2008; Windsor, Crawford, and Breuning 2021). If the discipline hopes to fix what is now a game of chutes and ladders which affects diverse scholars in our discipline (Windsor, Crawford, and Breuning 2021), recruiting and retaining more diverse graduate students seems a likely place to start.

Eventually, Dan and Cherie concluded that if such a graduate school resource were to exist, they would probably need to take the initiative to make it happen. Even though both were burdened by teaching during a pandemic (as many of us were) and busy with other academic projects and important life events (one with a new baby on the way, the other with an empty nest while starting a new job), they managed to find good colleagues to help with an edited collection. They then pitched the project to APSA and ensured that the final volume included the major topics that they hoped to pass on to grad students.

The process moved quickly. Dan and Cherie recognized their limitations, not only in terms of time and energy but in terms of their own intersectional identities and ability to ensure that the call for chapters resonated with people across all segments of the discipline at all stages of their careers. They reached out to colleagues known for their dedication to student mentorship and disciplinary service as well as for their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They were so happy when these colleagues—Julia Marin Hellwege, Davin Phoenix, and Kevin Lorentz—enthusiastically signed up for this project. They all agree that this volume may well be one of the most important contributions to the discipline that they will make over the course of their collective careers.

When this group pitched the project to APSA, they were met with support and encouragement. This project owes a debt of thanks to Director of Publishing Jon Gurstelle and Senior Director of Diversity and Inclusion Kimberly Mealy for their early support and for their help with revising and improving upon the initial prospectus and call for chapters. The response to the call for chapters was overwhelming. There are 150 authors on this project, and together they allow for a broad representation of the overarching political science discipline. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Madelyn Dewey for her expert work in formatting the book and designing the cover.

Editors' Own Experiences

Kevin: Much to the annoyance of my spouse, I love to bring along a guidebook whenever we visit someplace new. My husband always says this takes the “fun” out of exploring, but I find even a short preview makes me better prepared to take in the sights and sounds. Looking back, I think I should have consulted a guidebook before entering graduate school; unfortunately, one tailored to the political science graduate journey just didn't exist.

That desire (and need) led me to jump at the opportunity to edit this book. In preparation, I created a list of “things I wish I knew” before starting my graduate school career. Topping that list, not surprisingly, were items like understanding the application process better, selecting an advisor, and having a better idea of the academic and non-academic job markets. True, I did learn on the fly, and I was fortunate to have great mentors and peers along the way to share their wisdom and experience. It just would have been great to know some of this information before I dove in!

But my list also included advice that I desperately wished I had known before entering my first graduate program. I wish someone had told me the importance of a graduate program's “fit.” I wish I knew just how stressful graduate school was—mentally, emotionally, and financially. On more than one occasion, too, I just didn't know how to handle something, and certainly didn't know what resources (if any) may have been available to me. That's part of this book's goal: to help you navigate the “hidden curriculum,” or the stuff that they don't tell you about graduate school.

This isn't to say that I have regrets about graduate school. In fact, I look back on those six years fondly. I was fortunate to work with numerous people who are now dear friends, colleagues, and research collaborators. I have a professional network that spans the breadth of political science, and all the support that comes with such a network, too. (Indeed, I'm co-editing this volume with a former mentor!) I learned a lot (academically, personally, and professionally). And my career today wouldn't be possible without my graduate degree.

So, if I can provide one piece of advice? It doesn't hurt to bring a guide(book) along your graduate school journey. I wish you the best and much success!

Dan: I'm a first generation kid all around. Neither of my parents went to college, nor did they know anything about graduate school. I'm one of those "Limbo" kids (Lubrano 2004) growing up in a majority white suburban, and largely wealthy, school district with blue collar parents. My dad had his own construction business before a major heart attack pushed him into a white collar job as a building inspector. My mom also worked a "white collar" job, but as an administrative assistant. Steady paychecks meant that we didn't face some of the financial uncertainties that blue collar families face, but my parents still acted their roots. Then, my dad died when I was 13 and things became less secure. I cycled through a series of dream careers in high school—pastor, electrical engineer, lawyer, airman—all of which required at least a college degree. To this day I cannot even explain why I applied to the six undergraduate institutions that I did (and not others), but I can say that I had no idea what I was doing.

That lack of confidence that I'm taking the right steps follows me to this day. I decided in my undergraduate years that I wanted to teach political science at a college, but no PhD programs wanted me that first go around. When applying to grad school the first time, I balanced prestige (meaning I had heard of the place...), which was (somewhat) more obvious, and geographic location, but I received little guidance about what a good PhD program would be. I had no idea how to find one that fit me well. Hell, I didn't even know what I wanted from my academic career beyond wanting to teach. All I knew was that I needed a PhD. The second time I applied, after obtaining my masters, I was more successful, but equally clueless about how academia actually worked. I chose to go to Penn State because my stipend would stretch further there due to cost of living (blue collar roots, woot) and I was wooed by their recruitment weekend. I had no idea of Penn State's standing or its "placement" record. I had a vague idea that I wanted to do state politics, but not who I wanted to work with. I managed to figure things out as I went along, but I also didn't face many of the disadvantages that others experience in graduate school (racism and sexism, among others).

Even now, on the tenure track, I continue to feel in "Limbo;" out of place. There is still a hidden curriculum everywhere. I know very little about wine or fine liquor like my colleagues (and bosses) with white collar backgrounds. I'm still trying to navigate balancing the expectations of others (I'm on the tenure track) with what I want to invest my time in. I am still drawn to free food, just like I was as a graduate student. When I travel to a conference, I am very careful to make sure I stay under budget and I basically ignore any opportunities that would require me to pay out of pocket. I hate wearing a suit and feel more comfortable in blue jeans. My wife cuts the whole family's hair. I'm taking up woodworking as a hobby, like my dad.

Each step of the way in my academic journey has felt like groping around in the dark for clues to what I should be doing and what is valued. It has worked out for me and my journey has been largely positive. I thrived personally in grad school. I met my wife and we had our first son. I had a stronger community among fellow grad students then, than I do now among peers. But I know first-hand such positives are not the case for everyone. I have seen students abused (mentally, verbally, emotionally), discouraged, and neglected. I have seen bad program culture harm people and ruin careers before they even started. My goal in this book is to advance the work going on throughout our discipline to make the culture better. Some days it feels like things are advancing, then others it feels like we're moving backwards. But perhaps the most gratifying thing that I have heard over and over as we've worked on this book is "I wish I had this in grad school." The book does not pretend to cover every nook and cranny of the hidden curriculum, but I hope it improves even one student's grad school experience.

Julia: When I was in first grade, we were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up. I said I wanted to be a professor. When prompted as to how one might become a professor, I reportedly answered: "first you go to school for a long time, then you go to more school, and then you write a book." My mom always wondered how I would have known about graduate school or writing a dissertation given that I had no friends or family in academia. Unfortunately, by the time I was ready to apply for graduate school, I still did not know much more about how graduate school works.

As an immigrant in the United States and a first-generation college graduate, I didn't know much about how to achieve my goal to become a professor. I did know that higher education in the United States is expensive and so part of my decision on where I ultimately attended college (Colorado Mesa University) was to have a relatively cheaper option (than my first choice) so I could afford to go to graduate school. Not knowing that I could apply directly to a PhD program, I applied for a master's program first. I recall making a phone call to check in on my application and to introduce myself. The professor on the other end said they weren't sure about my application: "Sure, you have a great GPA, but it's not like you went to Michigan." I remember feeling deflated, but once I was finally accepted, I was determined to prove myself.

The students in the master's program were regularly ignored and dismissed, especially students like myself who had no funding. It was generally assumed that we were not interested in continuing to the PhD program. Further, my early advisor and comprehensive exam committee chair was a new professor, leaving me with little guidance. By the time I was admitted to the PhD program, starting my third year, few of the faculty members knew who I was. I was lucky that a senior faculty member took me under her wing and had me assigned as her graduate assistant. In the coming year, I thought I was excelling in the program. My advisor was encouraging on my "field paper," and I was feeling very confident...until he left. The department chair assured me that after summer break, I would be able to defend my paper and move forward. Come fall, he told me he had no recollection of the conversation and that the other likely faculty member who could advise me was not on board with my paper. Long story short, I abandoned my project, changed sub-fields entirely, and got a new advisor.

The second half of my graduate school experience was smoother than the beginning. I thoroughly enjoyed the work I did; however, the work was substantial. I had 40 hours of assistantships and teaching assignments. I also served as our department's graduate student association president and was the primary caretaker for my younger brother who was a young teenager at the time. While I can confidently say that I made many friends in grad school, there was also significant turmoil. From fellow students who called on the department chair to resolve office conflicts rather than resolving them as adults, to faculty members suggesting some of the students, with me in the lead, were ostracizing other students because they are Latino—all the while not recognizing me as a Latina—to faculty treating students as pawns in their conflicts, arguing we were being "overworked" despite us earning not only pay but publication credit.

Yes. Graduate school is hard, and navigating graduate school was not easy. However, and as I told my husband at one of those lower points, in my view my worst day doing what I do, still felt (and still feels today) better than I can imagine my best day doing anything else. I love my job today. I had a great experience on the job market because of the experiences and opportunities I had in graduate school. Of course, my favorite memories from graduate school were those long Saturdays at the Flying Star restaurant working away the day with my very best friends, with piles of books and papers around us, bouncing ideas, lamenting, and writing Stata code and sentences intermittently. Navigating graduate school was certainly more than just "going to school" and "writing a book," although, at the end of the day, it also was just that.

Davin: When I think back to my grad school experience, I'm frankly taken back by how unprepared I was for what I was getting myself into. How hard can it be, I thought, so naively. I got through college pretty well, pitfalls and all. This is just the next step up from that right? Oh, how very wrong.

My grad school experience gave me some of my most cherished relationships, and some moments when I've never felt more isolated. Some momentous triumphs, and some of my darkest hours. When my journey ended, I felt a satisfying payoff to many years' worth of sacrifices, exhaustive work, and lessons learned. But a non-trivial portion of my time in grad school was spent "floating"—drifting from one tentpole to another without a clear sense of my larger research trajectory, without confidence that I belonged in my program or the discipline.

To get out of this rut, I had to step out of my comfort zone and admit to myself and trusted advisers and peers that I felt adrift. Work with my adviser to develop a concrete action plan for learning the "hidden curriculum" of how to navigate this unknown world. Lean on my support system in a way that

was scary because it made me feel so vulnerable, but ultimately necessary.

I know that many people advancing through a PhD program face the same challenges. And these are especially pronounced for folks like me who are first-generation or carrying one or more identities that are underrepresented or underserved within the discipline. I hope this guidebook can reassure people that they're not alone in facing these challenges, help them craft proactive strategies to deal with them in a healthy manner, and surface some of the structural issues within graduate programs that perpetuate inequities, increasing our collective sense of urgency to work in concert to eradicate them. Lofty goals? Yes. But if we can help people avoid floating and feel like they're navigating their journey on solid ground, we've done a good thing.

Cherie: As much as I lament not having access to a collection like this one when I was a political science graduate student, I don't think it was possible to produce such a volume in the mid-1990s. At that point, advice about how to pursue a graduate degree was passed down from political science faculty to those they chose to mentor. And we were not self-reflective enough either in academia writ large or as a discipline to realize that, simply given the weight of demographics, this informal practice largely meant older white men of means mentoring younger white men of means, in a self-perpetuating loop. I know that I personally, as a woman with a working-class socioeconomic status, would not have gone on to earn a doctorate if one of those men, Dan Shea, now chair of the Department of Government at Colby College, had not only encouraged me to do so—but was also incredibly generous with his time—mentoring me, teaching me how to apply to doctoral programs, and writing me letters of recommendation. What kind of career and life would I have had, if serendipity had not intervened, and if Dan had not been hired to fill an assistant professor line when I was an MA student earning a certificate in applied politics at The University of Akron? I don't know where I would be, but it certainly would not have entailed a fulfilling career as a tenured full professor of political science.

Yet mentoring students who don't fit the "typical" political science demographic profile should not be left to chance encounters with professors who see their potential and mentor them. Moreover, mentoring from even the most generous white men at the time could not have addressed elements of the "hidden curriculum" that disrupt the learning experiences and career trajectories of women and those with minoritized and intersectional identities. It can be challenging and risky for minoritized and women professors to address issues of implicit bias, discrimination, and harassment directly. This was especially the case prior to social activism like the #MeToo Movement. Those who did speak up were subject to social and professional sanctions, as many academics, like those in so many other professions, were just not ready to admit that inclusion and equity were a problem. Stories were not shared openly, which not only limited the ability to mentor students with intersectional identities, but also limited the ability to seek policy changes that helped institutions of higher education and professional associations adopt effective reforms.

Hence, the only "direct" advice I received along these lines was from a professor from my undergraduate program, who upon learning I planned to go on for a PhD, simply warned me that women in political science needed to "be careful," especially at conferences. I got my first hint of what that meant two weeks into my doctoral program, when the only two advanced women students in the entire program dragged me aside to give me advice on navigating (i.e., avoiding being misogynistically berated and/or physically harassed) by a certain professor on campus. Other issues I learned to navigate on my own. When I started to attend conferences, for example, I quickly noticed that at least some of my male colleagues would not ask serious questions about my research and current projects, until after learning that I was not only married, but also very happily married and monogamous. I adapted and quickly began to lead with this information when I met new colleagues, immediately dropping clues about my happily married status into informal conversations. In doing so, I found a solution that worked for me personally, but to do so, I leveraged my privilege as a cisgender, heterosexual, married woman to create an informal remedy that was not available to many others.

We may not be perfect, but the discipline has come a long way since the 1990s. APSA has a code of conduct and an ombudsperson, and there are now enough diverse tenured professors in our discipline that the tide has shifted. At least some people can risk telling their stories—like those I shared above—

without worrying that their efforts to transform the discipline through transparency will be career-ending. In the 1990s, this project would simply not have been possible because there were too few BIPOC and women and other minoritized faculty to write the chapters, and even fewer who would have risked their career to openly and honestly address issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet in 2022, we were inundated with brave colleagues willing to provide blunt, pragmatic advice gleaned from their own lived experiences. I am grateful that my career has spanned this transformation of academia and political science. I hope that the edited collection we offer here will help to further lay bare the “hidden curriculum” of graduate school and, by doing so, will result in a more welcoming and inclusive educational and professional experiences for us all.

Plan of the Book

The chapters that follow address both common situations that graduate students will encounter (e.g., the application process; navigating classes, exams, and the dissertation; securing a job post-degree), but also the “hidden” curriculum less likely to be openly talked about: how to deal with harassment, discrimination, implicit biases, and other obstacles to diversity, equity and inclusion in the discipline and academia. Each chapter is written as a short encyclopedic entry, giving you a quick summary of the topic and advice and resources for how to navigate challenges associated with it. Given the guidebook nature of this project, authors offer up an insider’s account, synthesizing standing empirical literature and anecdotal accounts. Each chapter also contains references to other chapters in the guide, and we encourage you to consult chapters in the volume as they become relevant to you throughout your graduate school journey.

The book proceeds as follows: first, the volume surveys the application process, including how to choose a graduate program, how to finance your graduate degree, filling out applications, and special considerations for seasoned professionals returning to school. Next, several chapters discuss what happens after you’re admitted to a graduate program, from orientation to the dissertation. These chapters run the gauntlet of your graduate school journey and also discuss how to manage your personal life alongside your academic studies. The next three sections cover the most common professional development pursuits: scholarship, teaching, and service. Contributors provide best practices, tips, and suggestions for how to bolster your research credentials, prepare for your first teaching experience, and how you can engage in the larger discipline as a graduate student.

We then turn to discussing the job market and the various careers that are available to you post-graduation. Some chapters discuss how to prepare for specific careers in academia but also outside of the academe, while others provide guidance on how to prepare job applications and build your professional network beyond your graduate program cohort. The next two sections discuss more of the “hidden” curriculum, including the prevailing culture in your graduate school and the larger profession. Chapters explore concerns for various minoritized and underrepresented populations, offering anecdotes, recommendations, and resources, should you need them. Finally, the volume concludes with a larger discussion about managing your health (physical, emotional, and mental) and well-being in graduate school.

References

- Bates, Stephen, Laura Jenkins, and Zoe Pflaeger. 2012. “Women in the Profession: The Composition of UK Political Science Departments by Sex.” *Politics* 32(3): 139-152.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1973. “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.” In *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, ed. Richard Brown, 71-112. London: Routledge.
- Bos, Angela L., Jennie Sweet-Cushman, and Monica C. Schneider. 2019. “Family-Friendly Academic Conferences: A Missing Link to Fix the ‘Leaky Pipeline’?” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7(3): 748-758.
- Brown, Nadia E., Yusaku Hoiuchi, Mala Htun, and David Samuels. 2020. “Gender Gaps in Perceptions of Political Science Journals.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53(1): 114-121.
- Calarco, Jessica McCrory. 2021. *A Field Guide to Grad School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Crawford, Kerry F. and Leah C. Windsor. 2021. *The PhD Parenthood Trap*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Gardner, Susan K. and Karri A. Holley. 2011. "Those Invisible Barriers are Real: The Progression of First-Generation Students Through Doctoral Education." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 44(1): 77-92.
- Gildersleeve, Ryan Evely, Natasha N. Croom, and Philip L. Vasquez. 2011. "Am I Going Crazy?: A Critical Race Analysis of Doctoral Education." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 44(1): 93-114.
- Holley, Karri A. and Susan Gardner. 2012. "Navigating the Pipeline: How Socio-Cultural Influences Impact First-Generation Doctoral Students." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 5(2): 112-121.
- Lavariega Monforti, Jessica and Melissa R. Michelson. 2008. "Diagnosing the Leaky Pipeline: Continuing Barriers to the Retention of Latinas and Latinos in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41(1): 161-166.
- Mallinson, Daniel J. 2022. "Review of A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum." *Journal of Political Science Education* 17(sup1): 981-982.
- Mitchell, Sara McLaughlin and Vicki L. Hesli. 2013. "Women Don't Ask? Women Don't Say No? Bargaining and Service in the Political Science Profession." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46(2): 355-369.
- Windsor, Leah Cathryn, Kerry F. Crawford, and Marjike Breuning. 2021. "Not a Leaky Pipeline! Academic Success is a Game of Chutes and Ladders." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54(3): 509-512.

