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## Concerns for BIPOC Students and Scholars and a Model for Inclusive Excellence

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### Introduction

As a discipline, political science, like other academic fields, has historically excluded racially/ethnically marginalized individuals. In the last 40 years there has been an increase in the number of faculty who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) (Michelson and Lavariega Monforti, 2021). Still, when compared to their share in the population, BIPOC faculty remain severely underrepresented in the discipline (Garcia and Hancock Alfaro, 2021). In 2011, APSA released a presidential task force report entitled “Political Science in the 21st Century,” which recommended specifically that “departments should expand their graduate training to include more of an emphasis on race and inequality. This may require the breaking down of traditional categories used to structure graduate training and rebuild areas in more substantive and social problem-solving categories” (APSA and Task Force on Political Science in the 21st Century, 2011, 2). As we take stock of the current data, we know that this is an area that still needs much improvement. APSA released data on the racial and ethnic make-up of the membership in 2018 in the Diversity and Inclusion Report and the findings were clear: only the non-Hispanic White membership is proportionally representative of its corresponding societal group (the non-Hispanic White population in the United States) (Mealy, 2018). Black and Latina/o/x populations are underrepresented, while Asian Americans membership is higher than the percentage in the United States population (ibid).

While these numbers are frustrating, we also know that membership in the association is only one way to measure the diversity of our discipline, and it may overlook those who are graduate students or those who cannot afford the membership fees. This lack of representation can have adverse effects on graduate students from underrepresented groups. In this chapter, we cover the lack of representation of BIPOCs students and faculty in political science, the climate of political science departments and programs, the personal hardships students may face in navigating graduate school, the limitations of current racial/ethnic politics work in the field and conclude with a set of recommendations that we believe can help improve the experiences of BIPOC graduate students in political science.

### Navigating Graduate School as a Racially/Ethnically Marginalized Individual

In a field where students and faculty with marginalized racial/ethnic backgrounds are so underrepresented, navigating political science graduate programs as a BIPOC student can be a daily struggle. In the first place, individuals from historically underrepresented and racially or ethnically marginalized backgrounds face several challenges on the path to a political science doctorate. The research regarding that

Along with parental education, sources of financial support are an important factor for predicting doctoral study. A lack of funding influences whether students decide to pursue graduate studies and their ability to complete their doctoral degree (Tormos-Aponte and Velez-Serrano, 2020). Moreover, significant disparities exist regarding the primary source of financial support between doctoral recipients from different ethnic and racial groups (See *Table 54.1*). One note of caution ought to be mentioned when interpreting the results for Asian doctoral recipients. The “Asian” and “Hispanic/Latina/o/x” racial categories are considered “pan-ethnic” labels, as both populations are diverse in terms of national origin, language, religion, culture, and so forth (Junn and Masuoka, 2008; Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996). Therefore, we caution against understanding these populations’ experiences as monolithic blocs and instead, encourage research that considers the distinct experiences of each ethnic group within the Asian and Latina/o/x populations.

Financial support to apply to and complete a doctorate is absolutely necessary. Upfront, the cost to apply to doctoral programs can cost hundreds of dollars, which can be particularly challenging for low-income students (Ramirez, 2011). Even after being admitted, students incur additional costs and must often compete for grants for travel, research, etc. In sum, graduate school is costly, from start to finish.

## Challenges: During Graduate School

During graduate school, some of the challenges that underrepresented, and racially/ethnically marginalized groups face include the time to earn a degree, the lack of funding, ineffective mentorship, less opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship, and lack of social support (Tormos-Aponte and Velez-Serrano, 2020). This lack of support can manifest as macro- and micro-aggressions, imposter syndrome, and unique experiences that come with carrying identities facing intersecting forms of oppression (see chapter 49 in implicit bias and microaggressions, and chapter 50 on imposter syndrome). For instance, in the field of political science and government, the median is six years to earn a doctorate, but disparities still exist among different racial or ethnic groups due to the unique challenges that these groups may face. Therefore, it is important to explore what these difficulties are and provide recommendations for how to resolve them. This section discusses a few of those adversities and their significance.

### Intersectionality

Alongside racial/ethnic background, there are other identities a student can possess that intersect and shape their experience of higher education, such as first-generation status, socioeconomic status, age, ability, wellness, sexuality, gender, immigration status, etc. The intersections of these different identities and how they shape the experiences of privilege vs. oppression that individuals face is called “intersectionality.” The term intersectionality was first coined by Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in 1989 (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”). A student’s intersectional identity affects their graduate school application process, how they feel in their role as a graduate student, and how they navigate their interactions with other political science students, faculty, and the program overall.

Historically, academia as influenced by Western thought and traditions has served as a space of exclusion for the members of marginalized groups, including BIPOC individuals. As the statistics mentioned at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate, political science continues to struggle with the representation and inclusion of marginalized groups within the field. When you are a BIPOC student in political science, this continued exclusion can be felt in your classes, interactions with peers and professors, at conferences, program requirements, academic expectations, and how your research and validity as a scholar are perceived by the majority of the discipline.

### Macroaggressions vs. Microaggressions

When you are a BIPOC in graduate school, even small things like the racial/ethnic makeup of your class, comments peers and professors make, or the feedback you receive on your research interests can make you feel unsafe or like you do not belong. Whether it is intentional or not, your peers or professors may

make remarks or commit actions that are offensive or harmful to you or the communities you identify with, which can come in the form of assumptions of criminal behavior, treatment as a second-class citizen, underestimation of your ability, and cultural or racial isolation (Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow, 2010). These are microaggressions. Microaggressions occurring at the individual level are often a reflection of the macroaggressions occurring at the institutional and societal level. For BIPOC, microaggressions often perpetuate harmful and racist stereotypes or actions that further marginalize their communities.

Though microaggressions are difficult to identify, they shape the daily experiences of BIPOC individuals and over time “can take a real psychological toll on the mental health of their recipients. This toll can lead to anger and depression and can even lower work productivity and problem-solving abilities” (Desmond-Harris, 2015). Thus, student experiences with microaggressions can lead to less academic engagement and difficulties in completing their studies (Brunsma, Embrick, and Shin, 2017). Examples of microaggressions BIPOC students and faculty experience in political science programs can include: (1) a faculty mentor assuming a student should only study Latina/o/x politics because they identify with that community or, vice versa, that they cannot pursue such research since they hold close ties with that community; (2) a student asking a Black professor to explain their experience with police as a Black man; (3) a white male professor who only provides positive feedback on the discussion points made by white male students.

As psychologist Dr. Sue explains, these “remarks, questions, or actions [can be] painful because they have to do with a person’s membership in a group that’s discriminated against or subject to stereotypes” (Desmond-Harris, 2015). The culture of a classroom, political science program, or university more generally can create hostile and toxic environments for BIPOCs when they do not sufficiently address the micro/macro-aggressions taking place in these spaces.

## **Imposter Phenomenon**

The macro/micro-aggressions discussed above can contribute to BIPOC student and faculty experiences of imposter phenomenon, commonly referred to as, “imposter syndrome.” The imposter phenomenon may make some students question their deservingness to be a part of a certain space such as a political science PhD program. Much of this sense of not belonging is due to the way academic spaces perpetuate cultures and norms that continue to make BIPOCs feel excluded in these spaces. Examples of situations that may increase imposter phenomenon include: (1) being the only BIPOC individual in a classroom or program; (2) feeling discomfort in attending formal program events because of one’s socioeconomic and first-generation status; (3) not understanding the terminology or references used by professors and peers in a course.

These experiences can lead to BIPOC individuals feeling like there is no room for them in their program or academia more generally. It is imperative that political science programs critically reflect on how the standards and culture of their departments may affect BIPOC faculty and students and their overall success.

## **Challenges: After Graduate School**

### **Racial/Ethnic Politics Research Limitations**

As we have shown, BIPOC graduate students face a unique set of challenges on the path to earning the PhD. Yet, there are often additional challenges to success beyond the degree program. While conducting research on race and ethnic politics is not limited to scholars who identify as members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, many BIPOC scholars study topics related to their communities. Our flagship journal, the *American Political Science Review*, highlights some of the challenges scholars who identify as members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and those who study race and ethnic politics may face. In 2019, the association selected an all-women editorial team to edit the journal. Their team submitted a proposal to helm the journal, in part because women, scholars of color, and those who study race and politics did not feel that their work was well received by the journal (*American Political Science Review’s* incoming editorial team, 2019). The new editors credit their proposal’s success to their

stated commitment to “make the journal’s scope more reflective of the wide range of crucial questions our discipline addresses” (Ibid).

While the discipline has journals that focus on Race and Ethnic Politics (Journal of Race and Ethnic Politics, Politics Groups and Identities, and The National Black Politics Review), there are still incentives to publish in the top journal. According to the new editorial team at the American Political Science Review, “in 2017, 88 percent of authors published by the APSR were white, and zero—none at all—were African American” and that between 2000 and 2015, only four percent of the articles were about race and ethnic politics (Ibid, 2). While we have seen gains in the number of BIPOC students earning their degrees in political science, we have not seen gains in representation in the top political science journals.

Publications are the currency in our field. They are used to evaluate job candidates and tenure cases. As our discipline diversifies and as the study of race and ethnic politics continues to grow, we must work hard to ensure equitable representation in those outlets. When the APSA Task Force on Political Science in the 21st Century challenged us to think about “substantive and social problem-solving categories,” in 2011, they were really challenging us to incorporate the study of race and ethnic politics into our regular study and not treat it as a separate entity (American Political Science Association and Task Force on Political Science in the 21st Century, 2011, 2). That includes publications as well. The new editorial team at the American Political Science Review is a step in the right direction.

## Recommendations

We advance three recommendations that the political science community as a whole, and marginalized graduate students and faculty as main stakeholders in particular, should pursue in order to increase diversity and student retention in the discipline. First, we recommend that the discipline increase its commitment to developing partnerships with programs seeking to diversify academia. This could be done by actively encouraging political science departments to work with underrepresented graduate recruitment programs that provide prospective graduate students from marginalized backgrounds with opportunities to learn and perform research under the supervision of a faculty member, while also exposing themselves to the culture and expectations of graduate programs in political science. Our political science departments should aim to participate in the programs already offered within the discipline, such as:

- APSA’s Minority Student Recruitment Program (MSRP),
- Minority Graduate Placement Program (MIGAP),
- The Ralph Bunche Summer Institute (RBSI),
- Programs offered by their home universities:
  - Big Ten Alliance’s Summer Research Opportunity Programs (SROP),
  - McNair Scholars Program,
  - Summer Research Programs (SRP) such as Leadership Alliance Summer Research Early Identification Program (SR-EIP) and the ones offered by the University of California system.

Second, we recommend that the political science community commit to mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds on collaboration, co-authoring, finding funding, and preparing for the future. Lack of inclusive departmental and institutional climates along with a lack of strong mentee-mentor relationships have been associated with the “bait and switch” phenomenon, which occurs when academic departments present a positive image of their commitment to diversity to prospective students, an image that diverges considerably from the students’ experiences once they are matriculated (Slay et al. 2019).

This occurs because academic departments and other institutions in the discipline tend to believe that their participation in organizational and structural diversity initiatives aiming to improve recruitment and admission practices is enough to reduce racial and ethnic inequalities in who enrolls and graduates. This focus on the number of students of color who enroll ignores the role of the educational process itself in successful educational outcomes among marginalized students (Milem et al. 2005).

Moreover, the “bait and switch” model has led to well-documented difficulties for undergraduate and graduate students of color in their attempts to find faculty mentors who are both willing and capable

of providing the support necessary for developing and navigating graduate programs (Hurtado 1994; Nettles 1990; Noy and Ray, 2012; Thomas et al., 2007). In order to address the “bait and switch” issue, we would like to encourage the discipline, and especially senior marginalized graduate students and faculty members, to provide mentorship to first-year marginalized graduate students. More specifically, we recommend:

- That political science organizations establish mentoring programs that provide the ability for students to choose the length of their mentoring relationship and setting expectations beyond one-time meetings at conferences
- That political science departments hire more BIPOC and marginalized faculty in an effort to adequacy reflect the identities and experiences of prospective graduate students.
- That a graduate student mentorship program be established for graduate mentors to assist and guide undergraduate students throughout their graduate school preparation (Juárez 1991)
- That graduate students be assigned (or the student chooses) a faculty mentor who supports and guides students through coursework, teaching, attending professional events, finding funding, and teaching norms of professional responsibilities while maintaining the cultural integrity of the student’s background (Montgomery, Dodson, and Johnson 2014)
- That graduate students be assigned peer mentors that will help them transition into graduate school. First-year graduate students should be assigned two peer mentors who are at different stages of their doctoral study, one of which shares the mentee’s subfield and gender.

Finally, we recommend that BIPOC scholars and graduate students take the following steps to navigate graduate school and beyond. First and foremost, we recommend they prioritize their health, self-care, and well-being. Graduate school can be quite challenging, stressful, and overwhelming. Students should seek help if they are facing any difficulties and make use of university mental health resources (see chapter 69 on counseling and other resources). Self-care and rest are also important for one’s mental and physical health and overall well-being. Without it, students can burn out easily, which can impact quality of work and productivity, often producing a negative cycle (see chapter 67 on rest in graduate school). Once in the cycle, it can be difficult to break out, which leads to another tip: work/life balance. Finding and maintaining a work/life balance early on in one’s doctoral study is crucial (see chapter 69 on counseling and other resources).

An important aspect to this step is time management (see chapter 17 on effective time management). At the beginning of graduate school, students often find themselves overwhelmed with coursework, reading loads, and teaching responsibilities. Many universities offer time management workshops targeted at graduate students. One such method is the Pomodoro Technique invented by Francesco Cirillo. While it is tempting to work all the time, that is not sustainable.

It is also important to rest and maintain personal relationships. Students should strive to build connections with fellow students and faculty both in the department and outside the department. It is easy to become isolated in graduate school, consumed in one’s own coursework and research. Having social support and a life outside of work is important again, for one’s mental health (see chapter 63 on overcoming academic isolation). Additionally, forming positive relationships with other students and faculty are important for networking and collaborations on research.

## Conclusion

We have made some strides in terms of diversifying graduate programs in political science, but there is still more work to be done. As the discipline becomes more diverse, faculty and the political science community as a whole should rethink their approaches to students’ professionalization, socialization, and mentoring to make them more inclusive. For example, in our mentoring, we should help students to build their confidence, teaching skills, and develop professional networks and long-term career goals (Brunsma, Embrick, and Shin 2017), while also being mindful of the barriers that underrepresented and marginalized students may experience.

Beyond academic work, mentors should care about their students’ mental health, disabilities (phys-

ical and “invisible”), cultural practices, religious holidays (including those beyond Christian holidays, like Eid, Passover, Ramadan, Yom Kippur, etc.), and so forth. We also need to create research opportunities for promising BIPOC undergraduate students so that they can learn those skills early. For those BIPOC students that decide to pursue a PhD, it is not enough to simply admit those students to our programs and hope for the best. We need to create equitable and inclusive environments where they can receive effective mentorship, adequate financial support, and the skills needed to succeed in our discipline.

Descriptive representation without substantive change is no longer sufficient. We need drastic action to counter historical marginalization of BIPOC individuals and voices within the discipline. In order to do this, we need to critically reexamine department culture and that of the discipline more broadly. It is imperative that political science strive towards becoming an equitable space for the study of politics for both BIPOC students and faculty, as the future of the field depends on it.

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