

**Bringing Graduate Students Into The Fold:
The Incorporation of Woman Graduate Students into Efforts to Address
Underrepresentation in the Discipline**

Brielle Harbin, Ph.D. Candidate
Vanderbilt University
August 28, 2015

A symposium addressing issues of diversity in the political science discipline recently appeared in an issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*. In the symposium, seven scholars offer strategies for advancing diversity and equity in the discipline. Drawing on the political science literature, these strategies largely emphasize the need to organize woman faculty members, exploit political opportunity structure openings, amend current evaluation and promotion decision making practices, implement bias training, frame group messages to appeal to external allies and identify university administrators who might serve as institutional allies (Alexander-Floyd 2015; Mershon and Walsh 2015a, 2015b).

While these practices are certainly instrumental to advancing institutional change, I argue that movement leaders should also be intentional about incorporating woman graduate students into these efforts. In the PS symposium, Sinclair-Chapman (2015) calls for scholars to view undergraduates as “stakeholders”. She argues that scholars should encourage undergraduates to engage in “smart activism” because they will eventually become alumni who can pressure administrators to engage in meaningful efforts to improve diversity. While I certainly agree with Sinclair’s stakeholder argument, I argue that this logic should be extended to consider the role that graduate students might play in these efforts. My reasoning is threefold. First, current woman graduate students are the next generation of political scientists who may hold key leadership positions in the discipline. Second, transforming existing disciplinary norms will likely be easier among those who have not yet grown accustomed to existing disciplinary practices. Finally, woman graduate students will eventually move on from their current departments and become faculty at new institutions. From this vantage point, woman graduate students could play a decisive role in enacting new values for the next generation of political scientists.

While the potential payoffs of including woman graduate students in efforts to address underrepresentation in the discipline are many, there are also several challenges that might arise. First, graduate students are often in a highly vulnerable position in their institutions and may fear retribution for speaking up about inequities they observe. Second, graduate students may be myopic in how they allocate their time and resources. Particularly for those in the coursework phase, supporting efforts to transform the discipline may not be a priority. Third, younger woman graduate students may not have had consciousness building life experiences that solidified their commitment to diverse and inclusive practices. Finally, because graduate students are still early in their career, they may feel uncertain about the value of their contributions to achieving institutional change.

Despite this reality, I believe that woman political science graduate students should be considered full partners in efforts to organize for institutional change. While only anecdotal, conversations with my graduate peers suggest that they bring their whole selves to the workplace. This includes their interests in political activism, organizing, desire for gender and racial equality and more. However, these discussions are often relegated to private office talk or happy hour chatter rather than being placed at the center of their professional experience because, for the most part, these discussions are not integrated into the graduate training process.

With the momentum to address these questions in the discipline building, this could change. However, there are at least four questions that should be taken under consideration when incorporating woman graduate students into institutional transformation efforts. First, what ethical dilemmas arise when addressing the issue of underrepresentation in the discipline with those in a highly vulnerable stage of their career? Second, what are the different levels of feminist and racial consciousness that

woman graduate students exhibit? Third, how does this positioning affect how we talk to woman graduate students about issues of underrepresentation in the discipline? Finally, what are some practical strategies for rallying graduate women in efforts to make political science more diverse?

I examine each of these questions in turn in the pages that follow. Throughout the paper I refer to issues of underrepresentation broadly rather than focusing exclusively on gender or racial differences. I adopt this approach because the multiple identities of graduate women necessitate an intersectional approach to diversity conversations (Smooth 2013). The ideas that I express throughout are both research-based and reflections on my own experience as a scholar activist who has organized my peers around issues of racial, gender and sexuality differences as a graduate student. While I focus exclusively on interactions with woman graduate students in this paper, efforts should also be devoted to considering the role of graduate students who identify as men in this important work.

An Ethical Dilemma that Arises When Engaging Graduate Students

An ethical dilemma arises when addressing underrepresentation of women in the profession with woman graduate students. Particularly for those in the earliest stages of their graduate career, their position may be precarious. Many are unsettled in the process and trying to find their way. Many are also uncertain of themselves and may be seeking outward validation. Moreover, some graduate women may feel overwhelmed by the process and think that they do not belong—a phenomenon known as imposter phenomenon (Clance and Imes 1978). Imposter phenomenon is the experience of feeling incompetent or inadequate even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Within the political science disciplinary context, this might mean that

woman graduate students who have excelled in the discipline as an undergraduate, and have even spent time working for a member of Congress, still feel ill equipped to make meaningful contributions in seminar discussions. Previous literature suggests that these feelings are especially acute among high achieving women (Clance and Imes 1978).

This reality gives rise to a moral dilemma. If we know that most graduate students are already afflicted with these feelings of self-doubt, how ethical is it to, in the midst of these insecurities, interject additional information about the discipline's challenges with gender representation that may make women graduate students feel even more self-conscious about their place in the discipline? Indeed, Steele (2010) finds that openly discussing stereotypes about race or gender performance activates anxieties that, in turn, inhibit academic performance. In fact, he finds that those afflicted with feelings of stereotype threat, or the belief that their performance not only reflects their knowledge but the knowledge of their entire social group, often drop out of academic pursuits altogether. These findings suggest that the decision to engage in conversations about underrepresentation with graduate women should be done with great intentionality and only after fully considering the potential consequences of doing so.

The good news is that through a series of rigorous empirical tests, Steele finds that mentors communicating their high standards for evaluating work, while also expressing their belief that a student can meet these expectations, can undermine the harmful effects of stereotype threat. Moreover, he finds that creating spaces that facilitate cross-group conversations about individuals' academic experiences encourage healthy perspective taking. In my own experiences these findings were borne out. I am an African American woman. I am the first person in my family to

pursue a doctorate. For me, faculty members who were transparent about the challenges I may face, but also expressed their belief that I had potential, encouraged me to persevere through the most difficult challenges I faced as a graduate student.

During my time in graduate school, I have also organized meetings that explore the role that gender plays in the academic setting. In these conversations, I talked with my peers about imposter syndrome and moments when I felt that my race or gender negatively affected my professional experience. A highlight of these meetings was realizing that I was not alone in my feelings. Feeling less alone encouraged me to connect with others who I previously misunderstood or avoided. And I was not the only one. Many of us regularly crossed paths but were reluctant to share our anxieties. For some, myself included, these conversations provided much needed perspective that decreased feelings of isolation and even acted as a source of empowerment. I even encouraged a few of my peers to take a leadership role in organizing future meetings. While this experience was mostly beneficial, as an organizer I became acutely aware of the challenges that may arise when rallying woman graduate students around issues of diversity and inclusion. I turn to some of these issues in the next section.

Graduate Women at Different Stages of Gender Development

When one decides to engage with woman graduate students around issues of underrepresentation a new challenge arises: how to approach this dialogue in a manner that appeals to women at various stages in their feminist and racial identity development. Drawing on Cross' (1971) model of Black identity development, Downing and Roush (1985) argue that there are five distinct stages of feminist identity development. The first stage, *passive acceptance*, describes women who are

either unaware or deny that discrimination affects them. Women in this stage often avoid engaging with ideas that may alter their current way of being. The second stage, *revelation*, is often precipitated by a series of events or crisis that make it impossible to deny gender issues. The third stage, or *embeddedness-emanation*, is a period of discovering sisterhood. In this stage, women often develop close emotional ties with other women that offer them a space to express their anger in a supportive environment and be affirmed in her newly acquired feminist orientation. During the fourth stage, *synthesis*, women place increasing emphasis on the positive aspects of being women and integrate these qualities into their own self-concept. Women in this stage often transcend traditional sex roles, make decisions based on well-defined personal values and evaluate men as individuals rather than based on stereotypes. The final stage is called *active commitment*. In this stage, women become deeply committed to social change. Downing and Roush argue that women shift between these stages throughout their life span. They find that how women transition through these different stages is often affected by their life experiences as well as their various social identities.

Because women may inhabit different degrees of feminist consciousness, it becomes increasingly important to formulate outreach efforts in ways that reflect the various stages that woman graduate students occupy. For those in the *active commitment* phase, there is likely a consensus that systemic marginalization exists and a shared vocabulary to describe how these dynamics manifest. These women will likely be deeply passionate about gender issues and willing to devote their time and resources to efforts to bring about institutional change. For those in the *revelation* phase, on the other hand, the impetus to participate may be rooted in outrage about something that has happened to them or a close friend. Different from those in the

active commitment phase, these women may not yet be aware of the vocabulary to express their frustration. As a result, the language that women in the active commitment phase employ may be unfamiliar or confusing. Moreover, women in this phase may be outraged by sexism but not yet see how gender inequality is connected to a larger constellation of oppression that includes patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, classism and more. Consequently, they may champion anti-sexism but at the same time fail to acknowledge other forms of oppression that they, themselves, may perpetuate in political science spaces. Still others may be in the *passive acceptance* phase. For these women, social justice language may not resonate. In fact, this language may actually be off-putting. For these women, appeals about the necessity of institutional change may need, at least initially, to be framed in terms that appeal to women's career ambitions more generally (also see Mershon and Walsh's 2015b broader discussion of framing diversity appeals when seeking institutional change).

Even after graduate women at these various stages are brought into the fold, challenges remain. Most notably, how to marshal resources to both educate women in earlier stages of their identity development while also working toward the larger goal of institutional change. Scholars who study the gap between pro-feminist orientation, or individuals who generally support feminist values, and those who actually identify as feminist, suggest that this gap is often narrowed by personal experiences with discrimination, positive evaluations of feminists and exposure to feminism (Quinn and Radtke 2006; Reid and Purcell 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997) . Within the political science context, this may mean having positive interactions with fellow woman graduate students and faculty members who identify as feminist that counter long-standing negative stereotypes of those who identify as feminist. Previous

literature also suggests that feminist coursework may be one way to alter students' perceptions of feminism through exposure (Williams and Wittig 1997) .

Distinctions in identity development will likely remain salient over the course of efforts to precipitate institutional change. Indeed, they will likely be reflected in the actions and goals that woman graduate students undertake as coalition members. For those in the *active commitment* stage, they may be most interested in political science PhD pipeline issues. These women may also be willing to openly talk about how they perceive their gender to be affecting their professional experience. Women in this stage may also be willing to identify, educate and interact with male ambassadors who can help build consciousness among men who may be less receptive to institutional change efforts. For those in the *embeddedness-emanation* phase, on the other hand, their primary goal may simply be to build community with other women. As a result, women in this phase may be reluctant, or downright unwilling, to engage in efforts to achieve institutional transformation.

Some Strategies for Rallying Potential Graduate Student Coalition Members

Despite these differences, I believe it is possible to capitalize on the talents of all women in efforts to address the underrepresentation of women in political science. However, outreach efforts must be tailored to the distinct experiences and motivations that potential woman graduate students bring as coalition members. Some graduate students may bring a sophisticated knowledge of patriarchy and oppression and view this coalition as one component of a broader social justice agenda. Other woman may be inexperienced in the discussion of gender disparities and view coalition formation primarily in terms of community building.

What this means on the ground is that the challenge for those who wish to rally woman graduate students and bring them into the fold is to recognize where individuals are in these various stages of identity development. Moreover, the goals of mobilization efforts must be framed in language that resonates with women who are just beginning their professional journey and may not be fully aware of gender dynamics in the discipline as well as those who are more advanced in their awareness. These efforts must also take into full consideration the multiple identities that graduate women bring to their professional lives (Smooth 2013).

Organizers must also operate with an awareness of power dynamics and be intentional about designating a space for graduate student women to contribute during group meetings. Leaders should also openly (and repeatedly) acknowledge the value of graduate student contributions both in meeting spaces and group correspondence. Finally, those who are further established in the careers should serve as mentors to women who are committed to the group's goals but may be less advanced in their careers and need of advice on navigating institutional gender politics. Once these feelings of solidarity are fully formed among woman coalition members, graduate women can then turn to identifying male allies who are committed to issues of social justice, are willing to serve in information-sharing positions and advocate for women among their male colleagues who may be less receptive to conversations about gender issues and the need for institutional transformation.

In place of conclusions, I offer several day-to-day actions that current faculty women (and allies) can enact to raise race, gender, class and sexual orientation consciousness among graduate students. First, faculty can incorporate questions of power and difference into seminar discussions and departmental workshops irrespective of the research topic or subfield. These discussions may lead woman

graduate students to study in research areas where they are currently underrepresented. These discussions might also encourage a new generation of scholars to recognize how gender imbalances may limit the scope of questions raised in political science research in the first place. This awareness, in turn, may inspire the next generation of political scientists to pursue previously unexplored avenues of research. In other words, course syllabi and workshop series are not only information sharing documents. They can be tools for raising consciousness and rousing the next generation of scholars.

Finally, faculty women in leadership positions in existing departments can support the efforts of graduate students to organize to address issues of underrepresentation. This support could manifest in multiple forms. First, women faculty could talk openly (and honestly) with graduate women about how they believe their identities affects their professional lives. Second, faculty women could help graduate students who are interested in organizing think through best practices when approaching this work. Finally, faculty women could advocate on behalf of graduate students who petition for departmental funds to organize their peers during faculty meetings.

References

- Alexander-Floyd, Nikol G. 2015. "Women of Color, Space Invaders, and Political Science: Practical Strategies for Transforming Institutional Practices." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48(03): 464–68.
- Clance, Pauline R., and Suzanne A. Imes. 1978. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention." *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15(3): 241.
- Cross Jr, William E. 1971. "The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience." *Black world* 20(9): 13–27.
- Downing, Nancy E., and Kristin L. Roush. 1985. "From Passive Acceptance to Active Commitment a Model of Feminist Identity Development for Women." *The Counseling Psychologist* 13(4): 695–709.
- Mershon, Carol, and Denise Walsh. 2015a. "Introduction, How Political Science Can Be More Diverse." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48(3): 441–44.
- . 2015b. "Organizing Women: Diversifying Leadership and Addressing Discrimination in Political Science Departments." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48(03): 459–63.
- Quinn, Julie EA, and H. Lorraine Radtke. 2006. "Dilemmatic Negotiations: The (un) Tenability of Feminist Identity." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30(2): 187–98.
- Reid, Anne, and Nuala Purcell. 2004. "Pathways to Feminist Identification." *Sex Roles* 50(11-12): 759–69.
- Sinclair-Chapman, Valeria. 2015. "Leveraging Diversity in Political Science for Institutional and Disciplinary Change." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48(03): 454–58.
- Smooth, Wendy. 2013. "Intersectionality and Women's Advancement in the Discipline & the Academy." Southern Political Science Association Conference Within a Conference.
- Steele, Claude M. 2010. "Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues To How Stereotypes Affect Us (Issues Of Our Time) Author: Claude M. Steele, Publisher." <http://www.openisbn.org/download/039306249X.pdf> (September 14, 2014).
- Williams, Rachel, and Michele Andrisin Wittig. 1997. "'I'm Not a Feminist, But...': Factors Contributing to the Discrepancy between pro-Feminist Orientation and Feminist Social Identity." *Sex Roles* 37(11-12): 885–904.