Teaching the Hidden Curriculum in Political Science

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ABSTRACT   The "hidden curriculum" in academia represents a set of informal norms and rules, expectations, and skills that inform our "ways of doing" academic practice (Calarco 2020). This article suggests that relying on informal networks to provide access to instruction in these skills can reinforce preexisting inequalities in the discipline. Drawing on a pilot program that we developed and implemented in our own department, we provide a model for formalizing instruction and equalizing access to training in these professionalizing skills. Drawing on the literature on inclusive pedagogy, as well as our own implementation experience, we advance four recommendations for scaling and transporting instruction in the "hidden curriculum" to other departments.

Political science departments, and universities more broadly, seek to improve diversity and build more inclusive academic spaces. Diversity initiatives often target admission and retention of students from underrepresented backgrounds. However, a growing body of research on diversity in academia reveals gaps in access to mentorship and opportunities for building professionalization skills. The traditional, implicitly network-based model of mentoring rewards students who seek (and are not punished for seeking) mentorship from faculty. Through this mentoring, our discipline unevenly imparts a "hidden curriculum" of norms, soft skills, and informal knowledge (Calarco 2020). In addition to other efforts, our ability to build an inclusive discipline hinges on equalizing access to the set of soft skills that result in more concrete CV line items and advancement in the profession: funding, presentations, and publications.

We suggest that institutionalized peer-led workshops that prioritize reflection and active learning around topics in the hidden curriculum can address this mentorship gap. This article discusses the evidence around mentoring, professionalization, and the hidden curriculum in political science. We share our experience in creating and facilitating four workshops open to all graduate students in our institution's political science department, drawing on a literature on active learning to justify the structure and pedagogical priorities of these peer-facilitated workshops. We conclude with recommendations for those interested in adopting our approach in other departments: grounding sessions in assessed needs, reducing the pull of departmental power hierarchies within the sessions, the importance of institutional support, and the value of coordination with other mentorship initiatives.

ACCESSING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

The hidden curriculum in academia represents a set of informal norms and rules, expectations, and skills that inform our "ways of doing" academic practice, including research and other forms of professional conduct (Calarco 2020, 1). Many of these practices relate to the transition from the "student" phase to the "researcher" phase of graduate education, termed "professionalization" in some parts of the discipline. In political science—as well as in academia more broadly—learning around these practices often is informal. Because students and junior faculty learn these skills through inclusion in social networks that confer this knowledge, uneven access to these networks reproduces preexisting inequality in professional advancement (Anyon 1980; Jack 2016; Jack 2019; Margolis and Romero 1998). Our discipline has broadly embraced this informal approach to mentorship access. Fewer than one in three departments offers formal mentoring outside of formal academic supervision (i.e., advising), leaving gaps in broader mentoring opportunities as well as adviser-level variation in informal mentoring (American Political Science Association 2017).

Existing research paints a concerning picture of inequality in access to informal professionalization and mentoring, thereby driving inequality in professional outcomes for graduate students. However, it also highlights that improving equitable access to professional development and mentoring is an effective way of improving parity in professional trajectories. Mentoring and network building has been shown to improve the advancement of

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groups traditionally underrepresented in academic spaces: women (Argyle and Mendelberg 2020; Barnes and Beaulieu 2017; Blau et al. 2010; Bos and Schneider 2012; Cassese and Holman 2018), particularly women of color (Gonzalez 2006); Black students (Davis 2007); and scholars of color more broadly (Brown, Davis, and McClendon 1999; Epps 1989). We suggest that formalized instruction in the hidden curriculum represents one potential pathway to close the mentorship gap and to improve inclusivity in our discipline.

For instructional purposes, we define the hidden curriculum in political science as the set of skills and practices that are informally expected of us as members of the discipline but not programmatically instructed. These skills often include core competencies—from preparing comments as a discussant to navigating journal placement for article manuscripts—as well as cultural expectations of academia (e.g., norms for networking at conferences). Key components of professional advancement—particularly around self-advocacy with advisers; applications for grants, conferences, and jobs; and exploiting sources of hidden flexibility in program or job requirements—rarely are taught but represent a critical skill set for securing future employment.

This hidden curriculum, although important for career advancement in the academy, also may be highly variable. Some practices and expectations vary in different subsets of the discipline and may be highly idiosyncratic, including across subfields within the same department and across departments, disciplinary subfields, conferences, and "tiers" of institutional prestige.

This article describes our experience leading a year-long peer-instruction seminar on the hidden curriculum in our department. Our curriculum is non-exhaustive: we focused on four main themes, including building a team of support, navigating formal requirements, developing and funding a research agenda, and navigating presentation and publication. Our core point is a call to action in the discipline: we argue that mainstreaming instruction of the hidden curriculum in an equal-access manner is important to advance equity objectives in progression through graduate school and onto the tenure track. We propose a model of instruction in the hidden curriculum in which upper-year graduate students co-develop the curriculum with faculty members and lead instruction in a nonhierarchical setting that prioritizes discussion,

by explaining department- and university-specific contacts, resources, and requirements; (2) to facilitate relationships and mentorships across subfields and across cohorts in our department; and (3) to start a dialogue among peers about professionalization topics not covered in the main coursework of our department's PhD program. To overview our sessions, two salon hosts (both ABD PhD candidates) facilitated each session, bringing in other advanced graduate students when expertise aligned. Sessions lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. Each session combined portions of predeveloped content presented by co-convenors, interspersed with time for reflection and discussion both individually and with peers. Each session was attended by between 10 and 25 students in the department, mostly in their first through third year of the PhD program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sessions took place via Zoom.

The first session focused on building a "team" of people who support graduate students not only as students and scholars but also as people with needs and responsibilities beyond the department. Whereas graduate-student cohorts grow increasingly diverse, expectations for professional development often do not account for the various social and economic needs of students. In this session, salon hosts guided reflections and shared insights on the process of building professional relationships—including mentors who work in the same regional, substantive, and methodological spaces; members of a dissertation committee; coauthors; and peers at our university and others—and carved out space to talk about the nonprofessional relationships that are cultivated during graduate school. This includes friendships outside of academia, roommates, spouses, parents, and children. Salon hosts led participants through an activity to map out the people who support them in these different spheres—both professional and nonprofessional—and identified strengths and weaknesses in their support network for different goals. Participants met in small groups to discuss their reflections and share insights on the range of relationships that sustains their success in graduate school.

In the second session, salon hosts defined the timeline of our political science PhD degree requirements and shared links with follow-up information on deadlines and relevant contacts. We discussed how and where flexibility is built into the requirements and identified "point people" within our department's staff and

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reflection, and the formation of inclusive peer networks among graduate students.

A PILOT APPROACH TO TEACHING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

During the 2020-2021 academic year, we organized four workshops for graduate students in our department. For context, our department is at a large R1 university with approximately 90 PhD students and 40 faculty members. We drew themes for these sessions from Calarco's (2020) *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*. These sessions were conducted with three goals: (1) to lower barriers to success in graduate school

faculty who can explain different timelines and approaches for completing degree requirements. We paired this short lecture with individual reflection, in which we asked participants to think about whether any of these terms or requirements were new to them and which sources of flexibility that they might be interested in pursuing. Participants were grouped into breakout rooms, with a mix of students across cohorts and subfields, to discuss possible action plans. Through these small-group discussion times, we hoped to foster "cross-pollination" of tactics for navigating the multiple requirements and demonstrate that there are many different paths for successfully completing the degree. The objective of this session was to "even the playing field" for students who

are unaware of the norms and flexibility around degree requirements, a barrier that disproportionately affects first-generation students and scholars of color (Smolarek 2019). In the second part of this session, participants reflected on finding balance among the many different "hats" that graduate students wear. In addition to discussing the challenges of balancing many different roles and identities, participants had time to brainstorm action plans for leveraging support networks to better manage these roles in the short, medium, and long terms.

The third session was about the steps involved in planning and funding research. Professionalization events on funding research often identify internal and external sources for grants. This certainly is important information for graduate students, and the salon hosts shared aggregated information on specific sources of external funding. However, we wanted to broaden the scope of applying for grants to include thinking through one's research agenda and figuring out what can be included in a grant budget. In this session, we discussed different stages of building a research agenda and "pipeline" in graduate school. Participants outlined short- and medium-term action plans to develop and pursue that agenda. Discussion covered the types of research that graduate students might conduct before they complete the PhD—the dissertation being the flagship project, flanked by solo-authored and collaborative side papers as well as research assistant gigs that may or may not result in publication. ABD students shared mind maps of their developing research agendas and talked through the process of developing this range of substantive and methodological interests. They explained which topics they had pruned from their agenda and which side interests grew into more developed projects, for which they pursued funding. Most of the session was spent in breakout groups with peers in similar subfields who were tasked with reflecting on a set of questions about which topics most interested them to see how seemingly disparate points on their mind map can speak to one another. One participant expressed gratitude for the chance to see "under the hood" of more advanced students' research trajectories and that it was a relief to realize that the process of deciding and following through on research projects is not linear.

Finally, in the fourth session, we discussed different avenues to present and publish research. Perceptions about the necessity of publications in high-ranking field journals are widespread. Although opportunities to learn the process for publishing academic research exist (e.g., coauthoring with senior faculty), not all graduate students will have a chance for such professional

department, to presenting at broader conferences, to submission to a journal. To this end, and in preparation for this fourth session, we interviewed junior faculty in our department for advice that focused on their strategies for managing the process of presenting and publishing on a personal level. These faculty interviews enabled us to ensure that we were providing accurate information about processes with which we had limited experience, in contrast to previous sessions that focused on areas in which conveners and graduate students in the department were highly knowledgeable. We strove to keep the session accessible to students in earlier years, for whom publishing may feel overwhelming, by structuring time for reflection on both short- and long-term goals for a writing project. Students shared reflections on their conference and publication experiences and reflected on ways in which they might approach either situation differently in the future. With participants mostly second- and third-year PhD students, we spent the session mainly as a full group, and the discussion focused more fully on conferences and presenting.

INTERVENTION

In our department, professionalization traditionally has been the purview of the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). The DGS is responsible for organizing an annual meeting about the academic job market. During our four years in this department, there also have been occasional panels organized by subfield heads on academic writing and attending conferences. We departed from this structure, drawing on literature about innovative teaching to make two interventions in the design of our workshops.

First, these salons operate on a more active logic than roundtables or lectures that are the norm in many departments' professionalization efforts. Bonwell and Eisen (1991, 5) defined active learning as "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing." Many of the early texts on active learning emphasized the need for students to engage in tasks that political scientists perform to understand the core concepts of the discipline (Shulman 2002). Beyond engagement with information and ideas, education scholars emphasize the importance of reflection in active learning (McCoy 2013). Cyclical reflection provides a framework for examining feelings and thoughts about an experience or new information before evaluating and analyzing the experience and finally making an action plan for the future (Gibbs 1988). By grounding the workshops in reflection and deliberation—both independently and in small groups with peers across subfields and cohorts—we

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development. In this session, we facilitated a broader discussion of different "genres" of academic writing (e.g., a book chapter, an article in a field journal, and a political science blog) and weighed the advantages and disadvantages of publishing across these genres. After acknowledging the individuality of each publication process, we focused on developing a general understanding of a project's path to publication—from workshopping within the

shifted from a mode of instruction in which participants are passive recipients of knowledge to one in which they are responsible for thinking through and applying new information to their own life.

Second, the salons are peer led and nonhierarchical. Although we as student organizers were more advanced in the program than many of the attendees, we participated as peers in breakout-room

reflections and were upfront about the guesswork involved in sharing best practices. This created a different dynamic than traditional professionalization events, which often are modeled as roundtables or Q&As at which faculty or recently minted PhDs relate their career experiences. Our collaborative approach created a space for students from different backgrounds and across cohorts to feel that they were included, contributing members of an academic community (Barkley 2009, 25).[1] Whereas it certainly is possible for these types of spaces to be built in top-down initiatives from department chairs or DGSs, the horizontal structure of our salons lowered the stakes of asking questions, admitting mistakes, and speaking frankly about the contingency of contemporary academic life.

MAINSTREAMING INSTRUCTION OF THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

We present four recommendations gathered from our experience implementing this seminar in our department and structured conversations with faculty and graduate students around gaps in instruction and mentoring for hidden-curriculum topics. These types of seminars, we conclude, are most effective under the following conditions: topic selection based on needs assessment; dismantling departmental hierarchies to improve session inclusiveness; institutional support from within the department; and coordination with existing efforts and resources inside and outside of the department. We emphasize the importance of a nonhierarchical setting and institutional support to ensure that these initiatives do not replicate preexisting inequalities in mentorship access or create additional, uncompensated labor for the graduate-student conveners who assume this work.[2]

Choice of conveners, format of discussions, workshop venues, and workshop timing all can be adjusted to reduce the impact of these hierarchies. Campus staff with expertise in inclusive pedagogy—accessible through teaching centers—can provide resources and consultation for specific departments. We suggest that the DGS in the department collaborate with student facilitators to support the equity objectives of the workshops.

Third, we emphasize the importance of institutional support to promote these equity objectives of the session. We specifically highlight three types of institutional support: payment for graduate-student conveners, communicated buy-in from department leadership, and faculty support for content creation. At the end of the 2020–2021 academic year, we asked our DGS and chair for department oversight to institutionalize the programming. We proposed creating a position similar to that of graduate students who organize subfield workshops—a paid position in which graduate students coordinate with faculty field heads to manage seminar logistics. A "professionalization coordinator" would be a graduate student who works directly with the DGS, chosen through an annual application. Other departments can incorporate these hidden-curriculum salons into preexisting institutions (e.g., graduate-student councils). We highlight the importance of paying graduate-student conveners for their work. Departmental funding compensates them for their preparation and instructional time and also communicates departmental priorities. Institutional support—beyond payment of graduate-student conveners—also communicates the value of these spaces and shields graduate-student instructors from backlash in cases in which their work might clash with preexisting power hierarchies in the department. In our case, both graduate-student

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First, we recommend conducting a needs assessment among graduate students to inform the topics covered in the hidden-curriculum seminar. Gauging student interest and gaps in different professionalization reveals disparities in information transmitted through advising and mentorship. A needs assessment is most effective when it is part of a longer-term planning effort: seminar conveners should consider whether they aim for a one-year program or coverage of a rotating set of topics on a multiyear basis. In the latter case, seminar conveners should use the needs assessment to understand which topics should be prioritized earlier in the program and which cohort's different topics should be more targeted in terms of scheduling.

Second, we recommend facilitating these seminars with awareness of how the specific departmental culture supports or undermines the goals of such an initiative. In particular, it is important to consider the potential for social and professional hierarchies to reduce buy-in and effectiveness of these types of sessions. Facilitating these workshops in departments with more cultural hierarchy demands careful facilitation designed to reduce the pull of these hierarchies in the space and to empower students to engage and ask questions without fear of judgment or repercussions.

conveners were white women with external fellowship funding. In cases in which graduate-student conveners have insecure funding or less-privileged identities, institutional support will be increasingly important to ensure that they are treated equitably. Furthermore, support for new areas of learning for session conveners is another core institutional support that departments can provide. Although the nonhierarchical practice of the sessions is core to their inclusivity, graduate-student conveners may have limited experience with more advanced steps of our professional formation (e.g., publishing). Content for sessions on these topics can be developed in consultation with faculty who have more experience in these areas. Improving access to hidden-curriculum knowledge is a public good for the department and an essential part of creating a more equitable and inclusive academia. Institutional support can prevent the labor of providing this good from reinforcing preexisting inequalities in our departments.

Fourth, we highlight the benefits of and recommend coordinating mentorship. In our department, a subfield faculty-led professionalization seminar included topics that we had covered in the hidden-curriculum seminar weeks prior. Both conversations would

have been enhanced by sharing resources, and dividing graduate-student attention was not optimal. We recommend that conveners of hidden-curriculum workshops coordinate with others in charge of programming within the department—such as subfield leads and the DGS—to minimize duplication of efforts and draw on faculty members to improve the content of the hidden curriculum. We also recommend that coordinators reach out to other resources within the university. Teaching centers, for example, can help conveners plan sessions and develop facilitation skills.

CONCLUSION

Our institution, like many in the United States, transformed into a virtual campus in March 2020, completing the remainder of that year and most of the 2020–2021 academic year online. It was a difficult transition in higher education, and we observed how the lack of informal interaction in virtual learning exacerbated the already unequal access to mentoring and informal advising within our department. Although these inequalities were exaggerated by the pandemic context, they persist in normal times across advisers and departments, often coinciding with other forms of marginalization within academia.

We propose that departments consider institutionalizing instruction on topics among the hidden curriculum to equalize access and facilitate inclusive professionalization. This article draws on our own workshops and recommends a model for adoption in other departments based on a needs assessment, coordination with other initiatives, departmental support, and inclusive facilitation. Although we analyzed qualitative data from our participation in these workshops, we did not conduct a formal baseline or endline evaluation of the program, which limits the metrics that we can use to evaluate its impact. As this article discusses, disparities in mentoring are widespread and hidden-curriculum topics vary among departments. We believe that this suggests potential benefits to more widespread coordination across the discipline to address these topics. ∎

NOTES

1. Conscious community building is especially important in light of growing evidence of the severe mental health toll of graduate education (Flaherty 2019). Increasing rates of depression and anxiety stem from political scientists' experiences with "rejection, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, the job market, dissertations, and advisers" (Hummel and El Kurd 2021).
2. Many equity initiatives in academic spaces—by failing to account for power dynamics—ultimately perpetuate preexisting inequalities and/or heap uncompensated labor on already marginalized academics and graduate students. Although these recommendations are not exhaustive to prevent this from occurring, we believe that thoughtful and realistic design shared between graduate-student conveners and departmental powerholders (in particular, DGSs) can reduce the likelihood that these sessions will have inequitable impacts.

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