

Networking 101 for Graduate Students: Building a Bigger Table

Seo-Young Silvia Kim, *American University, USA*

Hannah Lebovits, *University of Texas–Arlington, USA*

Sarah Shugars, *New York University, USA*

ABSTRACT

Although the importance of networking often is emphasized to graduate students, straightforward guidance on how to approach this task is typically reliant on individual advisors who both know and can demystify the discipline's hidden and informal practices. This article provides concrete, point-by-point tips for both junior scholars and their supporters, building on our experiences in creating an online communication forum for early-career scholars on the job market. Specifically, we suggest a model of community networking focused on robust, cross-rank engagement along dimensions of similar experiences and similar interests. Community networking moves beyond individuals angling to obtain a seat at the table and instead builds a bigger, more inclusive table. Although junior scholars must focus primarily on their research rather than expansive service commitments, community networking is ultimately both a service to the discipline and a fruitful strategy for raising a scholar's profile and finding coauthors, colleagues, friends, and allies.


Graduate students typically are advised to start networking early in their career without direct guidance on why, how, when, and where to begin these activities. Many aspiring academics have neither much networking experience nor a clear understanding of what “networking” really means, with only vague, uncomfortable images of strained relationships aimed solely at their advancement.

However, “start networking” is excellent and essential advice for new academics. Academia requires high-quality scholarly production but also is fundamentally relational. Getting to know other scholars systematically and thoughtfully is critical for both academic success and producing good scholarship. Although networking requires time and effort—which are precious commodities for a junior scholar—there is potential to build rich relationships with future coauthors, colleagues, friends, and allies.

This article demystifies the idea of networking by clearly explaining its value, form, and function and by providing concrete, point-by-point tips on how to build an inclusive, community-centered network. Drawing on our own experiences as junior academics, we focus specifically on conceptualizing a model centered on the ideals of community, inclusion, and consensus. Moreover, we provide seven specific tips to navigate networking for junior scholars and their supporters. Through this community networking, junior scholars can elevate their scholarship while simultaneously improving the discipline for themselves and those around them.

CONCEPTUALLY APPROACHING NETWORKING

Graduate students often feel that they are outside of the academic community and must wait for somebody to invite them inside. This isolation typically is felt more acutely by students who are the first in their family to pursue a college degree, women and gender minorities, people of color, and others who historically have been excluded from academic spaces. However, graduate students *are* members of the academic community. Those “waiting to be invited” miss an important opportunity to claim space: to invite themselves—and their peers—in. Furthermore, the traditional narrative of networking only fuels this outsider perspective: it

Seo-Young Silvia Kim  is an Assistant Professor of Government at American University. She can be reached at sskim.research@gmail.com.

Hannah Lebovits is an Assistant Professor of Public Affairs at the University of Texas–Arlington. She can be reached at hannah.lebovits@uta.edu.

Sarah Shugars is a CDS Moore–Sloan Faculty Fellow at New York University's Center for Data Science and a Research Fellow at George Washington University's School of Media & Public Affairs. They can be reached at sarah.shugars@nyu.edu.

presents “networking” as a self-interested act aimed solely at individual advancement through self-promotion to senior scholars.

Community networking, conversely, begins with the belief that you already belong in the academic community. Its primary

Community networking, conversely, begins with the belief that you already belong in the academic community. Its primary goal is to create spaces that actively engage, elevate, and include others.

goal is to create spaces that actively engage, elevate, and include others. By continually building a bigger table, community networking ensures that everyone feels both welcomed and empowered to welcome others. In other words, we conceptualize networking as a process of creating and sustaining a public good—communitarianism—and a value to all individuals and institutions involved.

Our community networking model is motivated by both collective and individual shortfalls of traditional networking approaches. Although some individuals may garner benefits from utilitarian networking strategies, this approach typically does not move beyond personal impact, leaving systemic concerns and hypercompetitive spaces untouched. Furthermore, the individual benefits of traditional networking typically are not accrued equitably. That is, those with more power and privilege, who more closely fit the traditional model of “an academic,” are more likely to engage in and benefit from this type of networking. Finally, exclusive focus on personal advancement can actually *limit* a scholar’s networking success by undermining the benefits of building a well-rounded professional network capable of providing various forms of support.

We therefore recommend that graduate students engage in community networking, focusing their time and effort along two dimensions: similar experience and similar interest. Similar-experience networking maps roughly to the traditional idea of “horizontal” networking with academic rank peers, whereas similar-interest networking is comparable to “vertical” networking with senior scholars. However, the community-networking model suggests larger, inclusive spaces rather than strict lines of hierarchical activities with prescriptive formats.

Our model is not exclusive to particular academic ranks and can be applied to people above, below, and at the same level in the academic hierarchy. It leverages the community spirit of the fellowship of academics who share interests and experiences. It also dispels the harmful environment fostered by individuals who might be focused only on their own advancement, with intent to harm those whom they perceive to be in their way. Community-networking efforts remind members that they are not the first nor the last students who feel uncertain, awkward, and out of place in an academic setting. We all belong in academia—no matter who we are, we have the power to make someone else feel that they belong as well.

Tip #1: Recognize that you already belong in the academic community and you have the power to make others feel welcome.

BUILDING A SIMILAR-EXPERIENCE NETWORK

Networking begins with your most immediate peers—both inside and beyond your home department. These peers are individuals who share similar experiences and with whom you can connect through classes, workshops, and affinity groups.

Within the Department

Imagine that you are a first-generation and an immigrant PhD student eager to “hit the ground running.” The first friends that you will make are within your department, especially within your cohort, regardless of research interests. Together, you will take classes, solve assignments, lurch through exams, laugh, commiserate, and get to know one another as people and scholars. These colleagues know first-hand what you are experiencing at any given moment and can be an important source for moral support and validation. Furthermore, you can facilitate one another’s learning. Ask each other questions. Thank people who ask questions that you were too hesitant to ask. Recognize and demonstrate that mistakes are a crucial part of learning. In a healthy department, your fellow students should be a home ground where you are more comfortable making mistakes. According to Uncle Wuffle’s (1989) advice, the best tutor is “trial and error, and a lot of help from friends and faculty advisors.”

Furthermore, some people in your cohort may become your most trusted coauthors. This is a great way to begin publishing because the share of coauthored papers is increasing in academia (Metz and Jäckle 2017). Because departmental peers have received identical training to yours, they may share similar academic perspectives and methodological tools. Shared experiences and viewpoints can enable you to share ideas and drafts and to engage in full research endeavors with one another.

In addition to your immediate cohort, work to build relationships with other graduate students within your department. Get to know those who are both more senior and more junior—especially if you share research interests. Ask what advice they would give their younger selves or which resources they feel you might need to succeed. As you get closer to the conclusion of your coursework and your dissertation process, these relationships can create a community of support through a PhD program’s more frustrating moments. You also may be able to find supportive relationships outside of your department and college. For example, if you are interested in Latin American immigrants’ political assimilation, you also may want to talk to students and faculty in the sociology or international affairs department.

Additionally, consider partnering with departmental leadership to better meet student needs. Ask the leadership to organize professional-development sessions; ask junior faculty to speak about their work and the publishing process; invite senior faculty to share broader insights; and organize spaces where senior students can give advice and provide resources to more junior students. Junior scholars should be mindful to not dedicate too much time to service at the expense of their own scholarship;

however, these efforts can simultaneously support your career as well as that of your peers. Again, even at the departmental level, networking does not need to be all about *you* but instead can reflect your broader work to build connections between faculty and graduate students of all ranks.

Unfortunately, toxic graduate-school environments are not uncommon. These settings often are institutionally and systemically perpetuated and not conducive to this model. In this example, as a first-generation student and an immigrant, you

Value every single person you meet and look to connect people—aim to build a community, not merely to further your network.

might experience explicit or implicit racism based on your ethnicity. Let's be clear: you should not feel that you must or can shift the department culture. Your first priority always should be maintaining your own physical and mental health, supporting your loved ones, and making the best choices for you and your career.

Ideally, your department includes faculty and staff who actively work toward fostering a favorable atmosphere. Graduate students should not have to shoulder the weight of coordinating a communal network themselves. Instead, the department leadership should create or continue professional-development sessions and related opportunities, alleviating the need for students to organize them.

Tip #2:

- Given that the environment is supportive, graduate students should:
 - Build relationships within-cohort and with other students in the department.
 - Work with department staff and leadership to ensure social events and professional-development training best tailored to student needs.
- Supporters and allies should proactively foster primary relationships and development sessions, alleviating the need for students to organize the opportunities themselves.

Outside of the Department

Suppose you are reasonably comfortable navigating within the department and have a set research interest. "Now what?," you may wonder. At this stage, your information sources and views of academia likely are mediated through your advisor. Regardless of how well mentored you may be, it is vital to build a community that extends beyond your university.

Shared-experience connections outside of your university might be with people who share your experience as a graduate student or your experience in identity groups. Conferences are the most common venue for such networking efforts, and we highly recommend Gupta and Waismel-Manor (2006) for thorough advice on navigating conferences as a graduate student. From a community perspective, these spaces are essential not only for meeting peers but also for establishing a broader, multi-institution community of young scholars.

It may feel awkward, phony, or rash to start a conversation with scholars outside of your department or university. We suggest setting aside concerns about personal standing or potential embarrassment. These feelings are entirely understandable and your peers likely feel the same anxiety and hesitation. Your willingness to put yourself out there and begin engaging in community-building efforts will draw other students in through validation and appreciation.

Check if there are preconference workshops or sessions designed explicitly for graduate students. At conference recep-

tions, look for people who are standing alone or in a small group. Ask other graduate students if they have lunch or dinner plans. Make it your mission to find others who feel lost and alone and assure them that they also belong. Value every single person you meet and look to connect people—aim to build a community, not merely to further your network.

Building the network outside of your department will be a gradual process. Once you find an "entry point"—for example, a Graduate Student Research in Latina/o/x Politics Panel—you will have a few familiar faces at the next conference. You should not expect new acquaintances to have research interests perfectly aligned with your own. For example, they might not focus explicitly on immigrants but instead on related issues of voter choice. In fact, if you find people who make you comfortable showing up in unfamiliar conference socials, there does not have to be any intersection between your research interests! If you approach and keep in touch with them, you will find that venturing outside of your university becomes easier over time.

What should the supporters of students do? First, conference participation must be supported, including funding. The selection of the appropriate conferences to start participating in is a key part of advising. Gentle but firm encouragement to seek out fellow students, especially if a student is shy, could be helpful. The supporter's role is more valuable, however, in building the similar-interest network, which is discussed in the next section.

Tip #3:

- Graduate students should:
 - Approach fellow graduate students at conferences—they are just as anxious and/or shy!
 - Find and participate in sessions explicitly designed for student networking.
- Supporters should encourage conference participation and direct students to resources for travel funding.

BUILDING A SIMILAR-INTEREST NETWORK

Your network is not limited to people who share similar experiences. Get to know academics in your field who share your interests and are a few years ahead (e.g., postdoctoral fellows and assistant professors) and connect with associate and full professors when appropriate. In our example of an immigrant and a first-generation college student studying Latin American

immigrants' political assimilation, an interest in immigration and ethnic politics is what frames their interest network.

An excellent place to connect with your "knowledge-based family" is to find a relevant section or caucus within the profession. Sections can be closely related to your research field and typically have online forums, email listservs, and meeting events at major conferences. Caucuses include various APSA caucuses such as the Latino Caucus, LGBTQ Caucus, Asian Pacific American Caucus, and National Conference of Black Political Scientists. Check out major conferences and regional associations to see if there is something that aligns with your interests. Many sections and caucuses also have travel funding available for graduate students.

Once you have found a caucus or a section, see if it has a business meeting or reception scheduled. These meetings typically have socialization opportunities as well as designated panels. You need not be shy at these huge events. Business meetings discuss the group's direction or present awards such as an Emerging Scholar Award. Typically open to everyone, they are opportunities to meet people at all levels who are active in your area. Once you have found subgroups with a good fit, you also may consider supporting and organizing their events.

Success in academic networking requires courage and a willingness to reach out to others. You can and should reach out to people of all ranks, engaging thoughtfully with their work or requesting individual coffee meetings to receive feedback on your projects about four weeks in advance of a conference. You may have internalized "imposter syndrome," but this self-image is inaccurate. Nonresponses or dismissive replies are not a reflection of you. The lack of response is more related to the recipient's sheer volume of emails and should not be taken personally.

The good news is that many academics actively *want* to support junior scholars, and some do this through official channels such as the APSA Mentoring Program Match. They also want to build inclusive communities and share their experiences, knowledge, and insights. The challenge is that whereas doing this through one-on-one meetings or detailed scholarly feedback can be extremely valuable, such individual interactions do not scale well. There are not enough hours in the day for senior scholars to engage in all possible traditional networking efforts.

The community-based networking model can supply a solution to this resource-constraint problem. Because the model encourages larger tables and inclusive spaces, the opportunity can produce significant outreach with much less effort. One example of this is the mentorship network of Dr. Mirya Holman at Tulane University, dubbed Mirya Holman's Aggressive Winning Scholars (<https://miryaholman.substack.com>). This network includes a regular email newsletter and frequent conference events. Dr. Holman's efforts, although primarily one way, bring scholars of similar-experience and similar-interest groups together to connect, commiserate, and construct a plan to tackle academia's most significant challenges. Although Dr. Holman's hours are limited, her impact as a supporter is maximized.

Tip #4:

- Graduate students should:
 - Find their "knowledge-based family" through relevant subgroups in the discipline, such as conference caucuses and sections or online forums and listservs.

- Reach out to senior scholars and actively seek mentoring.

- Supporters should seek to rectify the resource constraints on individuals by spreading their own knowledge through larger dissemination platforms.

AN APPLICATION OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED NETWORKING MODEL

As discussed previously, our insight has been shaped significantly by our own experiences as community builders. One such endeavor shared by the authors is establishing an online communication forum (see <http://supportyourcohort.com>), a Slack channel, for early-career scholars on the job market. Creating this group took no specialized training or knowledge—merely recognizing a growing need and the willingness to input time and personal stake. The authors—entering the job market themselves at the time—felt the need for a supportive, inclusive, non-anonymous, and multi-way communication forum in which candidates could share information and support one another through the job-market process. In the absence of an official resource, we created one. We established a code of conduct for members and provided separate forums for specific interests. Members shared resources, insight, feedback, and knowledge of search updates. It did not alleviate all job-market anxiety, but it created a space in which members could commiserate and congratulate rather than going through the difficult process alone.

Support Your Cohort complemented the one-way official APSA eJobs board by providing a unique, multi-way communication channel. The platform was intentionally moderated and non-anonymous, thereby serving as a safe space where job-market peers could connect.

When we announced the Slack channel's existence on social media, the responses from job-market candidates and senior faculty were tremendous and positive. Faculty members across the world quickly encouraged their students to join. They also reached out to the group administrators with information about jobs, graduate-student resources, and job-market success tips. The membership encompassed both shared-experience and shared-interest groups.

Members almost universally found the Slack channel to be a valuable and supportive space. Frequent posts included well wishes, congratulatory statements, reminders about mental health resources, and encouragement during tough stretches in the semester. The intentional community-based network provided relief from the competition that many scholars might naturally feel toward those applying for the same position. Instead of competing with one another, the aptly named Support your Cohort group built a community.

This is only one example of how community networking can be initiated. Collectively, the authors have created numerous spaces, including multi-institution support groups, within-department training and orientation, full-fledged conferences, mentoring sessions, socials, and informal resource circles. Across all of these settings, the formula is the same: recognize a need, remind yourself that you have the power to fill it, seek out a method that elevates the community, and engage others in doing the work. If you feel out of place at a conference, feel like an imposter, or wish you had more access to information about academia's unspoken

norms, someone else does too. Find those other people and build support together.

It is not only your graduate peers who share these challenges. Many senior scholars face similar struggles or remember when they did and will be genuinely pleased to help support future academic generations. Community networking means having the courage to name these shared struggles and using the power you may not even know you have to ensure that others feel welcome, valued, and supported.

Tip #5:

- Graduate students should:
 - Create the spaces they would like to see, whether online or in person.
 - Remember that you are not alone and chances are that someone else is struggling as well.
- Supporters can assist existing networking efforts and share their own experiences to foster an inclusive environment.

IN THE PANDEMIC: VIRTUAL NETWORKING AND BEYOND

The difficulty of networking increased tremendously due to COVID-19 and the disappearance of in-person opportunities such as conferences. However, it also has highlighted the valuable role that online spaces can play in allowing geographically disparate and resource-constrained scholars to connect. Since the onset of the pandemic, several initiatives by courageous and compassionate early-career scholars have risen to the occasion and are likely to continue as important resources in the future. The 2019–2020 Support Your Cohort group has morphed into a 2020–2021 forum, including almost 700 scholars as of August 2021.

Other virtual seminars have emerged to support the gap of networking opportunities. The Junior Americanist Workshop Series (see <https://jawspolisci.network>) provides both presentation opportunities for graduate students and professional-development sessions such as how to publish books and journal articles. Other existing resources have proven extremely valuable—for example, the Women Also Know Stuff initiative (see www.womenalsoknowstuff.com, or #womenalsoknowstuff) (Beaulieu et al. 2017) promotes political science research by women, actively celebrating and disseminating new research. The same is true for People of Color Also Know Stuff initiative (see <https://sites.google.com/view/pocexperts/home> or #pocalsoknowstuff). Online

Conferences also have begun to provide virtual gathering spaces in the form of virtual coffee and happy hours. If you found these to be excruciatingly awkward, you are not alone. Because randomness is reduced in an online setting, it is difficult to find someone to begin a more natural conversation. However, understand that virtual gatherings still serve you better than zero opportunities. For an example of what the complete lack of networking can do to academic collaboration, see Campos, Leon, and McQuillin (2018).

Building a social media presence and joining the online community also can be extremely helpful. Twitter is not the appropriate tool for everyone but it can be an invaluable opportunity to follow recent conversations in your subfield, get to know other junior academics, and tap into the broader professional network. Remember that you do not need to actively promote yourself on Twitter—it is an excellent venue for simply listening as well as for promoting the work of others. Specifically, we recommend that junior scholars use Twitter as an additional resource to expand their shared-experience and shared-interest networks. Rather than aiming to follow influential accounts, use your time on social media to engage with peers and those with substantially overlapping scholarly interests. Look for people with whom you can connect easily—and who could genuinely benefit from your friendship—and develop a community of mutual support. For an overview of how scholars use online tools, see Esarey and Wood (2018). For an example of how a group of scholars is working to offset women's underrepresentation on Twitter, see Beaulieu et al. (2017). These scholars offer insights into how supporters can use online tools to help junior scholars as well.

Tip #6:

- Graduate students should utilize online gatherings and seminar series.
- Supporters should attend students' virtual presentations and offer support via online platforms.

CONCLUSION

We believe that demystifying networking as a skill for academic success is a crucial step in democratizing academia. This article conceptualizes networking through a community-building framework in which fellowship and inclusion are the top priorities. Our model builds on the dimensions of similar experiences and similar interests to help graduate students build spaces in which they are

Junior scholars must focus primarily on their research rather than expansive service commitments; however, community networking is ultimately both a service to the discipline and a fruitful strategy for raising a scholar's profile and finding coauthors, colleagues, friends, and allies.

seminar series such as the Minority Politics Online Seminar Series (see <https://minoritypolitics.netlify.app>) and The International Methods Colloquium (see www.methods-colloquium.com) continue to provide opportunities for reaching a broader audience.

both welcomed and actively welcoming of others. Based on our own experiences of providing a supportive environment for scholars entering the job market, we provide a concrete to-do list for graduate students and junior scholars.

Junior scholars must focus primarily on their research rather than expansive service commitments; however, community networking is ultimately both a service to the discipline and a fruitful strategy for raising a scholar's profile and finding future coauthors, colleagues, friends, and allies. To sustain an inclusive

Tip #7:

- Graduate students should:
 - Recognize that community building is not a threat to personal achievement.
 - Lean on your network and reciprocate the help that you have received.

ecosystem, be kind and reciprocate the help that you have received—elevate others and “pay it forward” if you can. No matter who you are, no matter what rank, you have the power to make someone else feel welcome and included. Approach networking not only for self-advancement but also as an oppor-

tunity to grow academia and your subfield as a richer, inclusive community. ■

REFERENCES

- Beaulieu, Emily, Amber E. Boydston, Nadia E. Brown, Kim Yi Dionne, Andra Gillespie, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Melissa R. Michelson, Kathleen Searles, and Christina Wolbrecht. 2017. “Women Also Know Stuff: Meta-Level Mentoring to Battle Gender Bias in Political Science.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (3): 779–83.
- Campos, Raquel, Fernanda Leon, and Ben McQuillin. 2018. “Lost in the Storm: The Academic Collaborations That Went Missing in Hurricane ISSAC.” *The Economic Journal* 128 (610): 995–1018.
- Esarey, Justin, and Andrew R. Wood. 2018. “Blogs, Online Seminars, and Social Media as Tools of Scholarship in Political Science.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (4): 811–19.
- Gupta, Devashree, and Israel Waismel-Manor. 2006. “Network in Progress: A Conference Primer for Graduate Students.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39 (3): 485–90.
- Metz, Thomas, and Sebastian Jäckle. 2017. “Patterns of Publishing in Political Science Journals: An Overview of Our Profession Using Bibliographic Data and a Co-Authorship Network.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (1): 157–65.
- Wuffle, A. 1989. “Uncle Wuffle’s Advice to the Advanced Graduate Student.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 22 (4): 838–39.