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Broadening the Pathway for Graduate Studies in Political Science

Between 1995 and 2005, Latinxs made up 8.6% of political science undergraduate students in the United States. Yet, during this period Latinxs only made up 4.1% of PhD recipients. Since then, the share of Latinx PhD recipients plateaued at 5% of political science and government doctoral degree recipients, and although more Latina women receive bachelor degrees in political science, the share of women drops considerably at the Ph.D. level (Monforti & Michelson 2008, 161). The slow pace of progress in this arena should come as no surprise, as undergraduates from underrepresented groups seeking to pursue graduate studies in political science continue to face significant hurdles. In this piece we briefly discuss the hurdles that students from underrepresented groups face as they transition into graduate studies and develop a series of recommendations for addressing these challenges.

The challenges that students from historically underrepresented groups face in gaining admission and finishing their doctoral degrees in political science are numerous. They include lack of funding, mentorship, opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship, and social support. Lack of funding not only shapes students' decisions to pursue graduate studies and attend a graduate program, it also hinders their ability to complete a doctoral degree (Cusworth 2001; Bair and Haworth 1999; Monforti and Michelson 2008). Students also cite lack of mentorship or effective mentorship as one of the constraints on their academic success (Monforti and Michelson 2008), specifically the opportunity to benefit from apprenticeship experiences, including research and teaching assistantships, co-authorship, and networking opportunities (Monforti and Michelson 2008; Turner and Thompson 1993). Thirdly, an important determinant of underrepresented student academic success is their social support. Students who have positive interactions and relationships with other students, faculty, and staff within their departments are more likely to graduate (Bair and Haworth 1999).

Undergraduates in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) must also contend with the decline of state funding for their institutions of higher education and the impacts that these budget cuts have on counseling services, hiring of faculty, and the creation of a climate conducive to academic excellence. For instance, in a survey administered to current and recently graduated political science students from the University of Puerto Rico (N=78), we find that 78% of survey participants reported that they like doing research, but only 23% had the opportunity to present their research at a conference or symposium, and only 2 students had their research published. Students also reported that one of the greatest limitations they faced was the lack of mentorship opportunities and time to work or improve on their research project. Additionally, students reported their desire for more advanced methodological training in preparation for their graduate studies.

Motivated by our findings and with the aim of upending these tendencies in political science, we developed the Minority Graduate Placement Program (MIGAP). During the next two years we will pilot this program in Puerto Rico and support undergraduate political science students at the University of Puerto Rico as they navigate the graduate school application process. Upon completion of the pilot program, MIGAP will be scaled up to serve Underrepresented Minority (URM) students at Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) in the continental United States. With the generous support of the American Political Science Association (APSA) Second Century Fund, and in partnership with doctoral degree conferring political science departments in the U.S, MIGAP will: 1) arrange campus visits for prospective applicants, 2) provide small faculty-undergraduate collaborative research incentive grants, 3) host a research methods training camp during the summer prior to their application, 4) provide graduate school and funding application workshops, 5) add program participants to the APSA Minority Student Recruitment Program database, and 6) match students with potential mentors.

MIGAP is aligned with previous research that identifies the positive impact that undergraduate research experiences have on a student's graduate experience (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman 2002; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Undergraduate research experiences also allow students to develop strong of mentor-mentee relationship and improve their self-efficacy and self-confidence (Hu, Kuh, & Li, 2008).

This program also supports women faculty and faculty of color, often overburdened with supporting women and minority students who do not see themselves represented in anyone else in their departments, and in the discipline more generally. This kind of programming is particularly needed in institutions facing financial hardships, such as the University of Puerto Rico, where there is comparatively little institutional investment in student counseling. Alongside the burdens of the tenure-track and family responsibilities, "inhospitable" institutional climates, and research norms that discount collaborative work that could nurture women's careers, a leaky pipeline further exacerbates the issues that political scientists from underrepresented groups face as they navigate the profession (APSA Task Force 2004, 2; Sinclair-Chapman 2015).

Ultimately, MIGAP will contribute to developing what Sinclair-Chapman (2015) calls a diversity infrastructure. Along with APSA's Diversity and Inclusion Programs, this project broadens APSA's diversity infrastructure by developing a pilot campus visitation program, informal mentorship relationships, preparing students for summer research opportunities (e.g. Summer Research Opportunity Programs, Leadership Alliance, and the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers), helping them navigate graduate school applications, and fostering their participation in the APSA Minority Fellowship Program (MFP), and Ralph Bunche Summer Institute (RBSI). Further, we seek to improve retention and graduation rates by fostering collaborative relationships across institutions of higher education and by mobilizing support for students and faculty in MSIs. These relationships are key components of a strategy for diversifying political science (Beckwith 2015; Mealy 2015; Sinclair-Chapman 2015). Collectively, these coalitions will allow us to seize a particularly opportune moment for developing a holistic approach to diversifying political science. It comes at a moment in which APSA status committees have sought to increase their collaborative work around pipeline, recruitment, and retention efforts (Mealy 2018).

Although recruitment and retention of Latinx student has proven to be challenging, we argue that this is far from being an intractable problem. Rather, we can leverage what we already know about supporting students and faculty from underrepresented groups to design and implement programming that enables their success.

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