Graduate Students and Leadership Positions

By Ervin Malakaj

In a recent [article](http://chronicle.com/article/Down-With-Service-Up-With/142897/) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Cathy N. Davidson calls attention to a challenge that colleges and universities across the country face when it comes to filling key roles on committees and other administrative leadership positions: when looking for qualified individuals to fill these posts, administrators often “return to those same overworked people again,” despite seeking to avoid burdening the “six usual suspects.” Davidson notes that there is a “shortage of talented faculty leaders at our institutions of higher learning” and that institutions often “offer no clear pathway to leadership.”

  She furthermore claims that the “service” component of the “three pillars of our professional advancement” (the other two being scholarship and teaching) “is typically treated almost as an afterthought.” Davidson argues that a reevaluation of “service” and a new system that more consciously rewards those in leadership positions and encourages others to partake “would mean changing our idea of what responsible participation in an institution and a profession entails.”

  I would argue that the issues Davidson outlines with regard to service and leadership—as neglected components among faculty professional development initiatives—are also often defined in a similar fashion (as an “afterthought”) in academic training at graduate programs across the country. If the service component (or, the leadership component, as Davidson reformulates it) is so very central for a healthy institutional environment, graduate training needs to address this aspect in a more explicit fashion.

Despite the fact that the institutional culture varies from university to university and sometimes from department to department (at the same institution), there are many ways that graduate students can (even at an early stage in the program) find ways to function in leadership roles.

  Leadership positions are generally available in the home departments and students often serve as representatives of the graduate student body to the faculty by sitting in on faculty meetings. These sorts of opportunities allow students insight with regard to the conversations that take place at these among faculty and shed light on the administrative structure of the department. Graduate student groups on campus are another place where students can turn to find ways to serve in leadership positions. Student groups often engage in extensive programming for the larger university community. Especially student governance presents multiple opportunities in which students can get involved and get to know the larger dynamic among departments and the various administrative units of the university.  

There are also various ways that graduate students can get involved in national and even international graduate student and professional organizations. These organizations often flourish only with strong executive boards, which are often very difficult to staff with reliable, creative, energetic, and leadership-oriented individuals.

In order to do so, students have to be encouraged by faculty advisors to look into ways of participating in the larger university community. The discourse often dictates that the service or leadership component should not be foregrounded during academic training and students often find these “extra” curricular positions to be burdens in their already packed research and teaching schedule. However, if we are to serve as active members of the faculty post-defense, a healthy relationship to service and leadership positions needs to be fostered early on in our training.

Furthermore, an emphasis on the importance of service and leadership during studies could help students harness various additional skills that could be applied in a variety of non-academic settings. In a time when faculty positions are very difficult to get, broadening a skill-set is crucial for marketability with regard to job opportunities outside of the academic parameters.