

# Reflections on the APSA Report on Graduate Education: International Students and Their Teacher Training

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## Introduction

The January 2005 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics* carried a report compiled by the APSA Task Force on Graduate Education which provides numerous suggestions to political science programs nationwide on preparing graduate students for professional careers, improving mentoring and advising, and revising financial package/plans to support ABDs in their final stretch (Beltran et al. 2005). Among those proposals was a section specifically designed to address unique problems international students, international graduate assistants (IGA), and international graduate student instructors (IGSI) face at U.S. institutions:

Foreign students have become a substantial presence in many graduate programs. All of them, but especially those from non-English speaking countries, face special challenges. . . . Moreover, during their graduate training, undergraduate teaching may be difficult for them, thereby eliminating a major source of funding. . . . Departments also need to consider what special training may be necessary to help graduate students from other countries be effective in today's U.S. classroom. (131–132)

As the report points out, IGA and IGSI have long been a part of undergraduate education at colleges and universities in the U.S., where among many other activities they teach their own courses, lead discussion sections, mentor, manage internship programs, and compose and grade exams. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chi-

ago released a summary report on *Doctoral Recipients from United States Universities in 2004* indicating that 32% of all doctoral recipients across disciplines in the school year 2002–2003 were from foreign countries (National Opinion Research Center 2004, 17). Even considering the decrease in the number of new international students after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the role of international students as graduate assistants or graduate student instructors is unlikely to drastically diminish in the near future.

Yet despite their significant presence, we do not hear much from international students in political science programs regarding their teacher training in the U.S. or the unique problems they face in classrooms as graduate assistants or instructors. These can range from having difficulties in connecting with American undergraduate students, including enduring disrespectful behaviors and beliefs, verbal abuse, or preconceived ideas that IGA/IGSI are not good enough. Undergraduate students may also complain about the English proficiency of IGA/IGSI or wrongfully blame them for unsatisfactory grades. The silence blanketing these matters may leave the impression that these issues do not exist in our discipline, as both political science professionals at the national level and international students are reluctant to acknowledge (much less discuss openly) the existence of the unique challenges of IGA/IGSI, especially for those from non-English-speaking countries.

Although undergraduate students often identify language as the primary impediment to their comprehending an IGA/IGSI's classroom instruction, according to Catherine Ross, the director of the International Teaching Assistant Program of the Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Connecticut, the problems are only occasionally related to English proficiency. Universities nor-

mally require their IGA/IGSI to take speaking tests in English before assigning them to classroom instruction, including leading discussion sections, and require students to take supplemental English classes if they fail the tests. Rather, Ross attributes the problems more to cultural confusion/differences such as the IGA/IGSI not knowing the proper distance between teaching staff and students in the U.S., lacking pedagogical skills, being unaware of their teaching style (verbal or nonverbal communication skills may be different from what is necessary to succeed in the American classroom), or simply not knowing that "smiling" is a social necessity in this country. In some cases, the problems can be logistical, stemming from classroom acoustics that make it difficult for students to hear instructors. In others, it can be a problem experienced by the larger world of graduate student instructors, such as confusion about the best level of instruction.

For their part, undergraduate students often lack coping strategies to respond to the situation. In fact, undergraduate students, especially first semester freshmen, are usually not sufficiently sophisticated to identify exactly what obstacles or differences are keeping them from fostering a mutually beneficial relationship with IGA/IGSI. In other words, student evaluations of IGA/IGSI do not necessarily accurately identify problems, even though such awareness is important to ensure fairness in evaluating IGA/IGSI and international teaching staff, as well as international job candidates who are asked to demonstrate their teaching effectiveness on campus visits.

Thus the IGA/IGSI and their teacher training is a serious issue that needs to be addressed in our discipline. Contrary to the popular perception that international students are temporary guests, the APSA report on placement in 2001–2002 indicates that the number of

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international students who are placed at U.S. colleges and universities is actually larger than that of all U.S. minorities combined (Lopez 2003). Next to Whites as a group, international students represent the second largest in the placement class of 2002. Nevertheless, the temporary foreign guest myth may foster a misperception that teacher training for IGA and IGSI is a matter of irrelevance, as they are expected to eventually go back home, teach in their mother tongues, and adopt the most dominant teaching styles in their own countries. But because many IGA/IGSI may end up permanently at U.S. institutions, it is important that departments identify what issues surround IGA/IGSI and their teacher training, tackle them together with the IGA/IGSI while also enlisting undergraduate students, and most important, *openly talk about these issues*.

Some may argue that because these are individual problems unique to IGA and IGSI, they should be solved individually, and thus these difficulties may not require discipline-wide attention or solutions. Yet, these are not only individual problems, but also departmental problems commonly occurring nationwide at many large Ph.D.-granting public and private universities with a significant international student body. It has developed into a serious political issue recently with potentially ominous consequences to IGA/IGSI as well as tenured international professors: Bette Grande, a Republican state representative in North Dakota, introduced a bill in January 2005 requiring universities to reimburse tuition if students complain in writing that they had to withdraw from a class because their instructor did not “speak English clearly and with good pronunciation.” This bill also requires universities to reassign those instructors to non-teaching positions if 10% of the students in the class file such complaints (Gravois 2005). Fortunately, after Grande met with experts in international education, higher education, and ESL (English as a Second Language) and realized undergraduate students were also accountable in the two-way IGA/IGSI-student communication problems, the bill was substantially toned down to merely ask universities to strictly enforce the existing official grievance process to better accommodate student interests.

I dare say I am more familiar with IGA/IGSI’s teacher training and their unique problems than many American professionals because of my unique Caesar-like experience of “*veni, vidi, vici*”—I came, I saw, and I conquered. Because of my undergraduate studies here in the U.S. and the nature of my

positions, I have witnessed these special problems, some of which I have later encountered myself and since overcome: I am an international student who has lived for 13 years in the U.S., during which time I have been a doctoral candidate with a Bachelor’s and a Master’s from U.S. universities, an ESL speaker from Japan, an instructor in political science, a university administrator regarding graduate admissions and records, a former senior student advisor for international students, a mentor for new IGA/IGSI, and, finally, an aspiring political scientist who wants to find out how far I can make it in the U.S. My experiences have taught me that there are undoubtedly difficult challenges awaiting the first-time and inexperienced IGA and IGSI, but there are also solutions and great rewards from fulfilling those first teaching assignments. The key for successful classroom management partly depends on whether these teachers have the full support of faculty members and whether they can develop coping skills and resilience.

This article will provide three insights and recommendations: 1) reasons behind the silence regarding IGA/IGSI’s teacher training and their problems; 2) a set of proposals for political science faculties, departments, and schools; and 3) a survival guide for new IGA/IGSI.

### **Silence over IGA/IGSI and Their Teacher Training**

In addition to the temporary foreign guest myth and customary cultural difference explanations of keeping private matters private, there are many reasons why IGA/IGSI as well as political science professionals remain relatively silent over IGA/IGSI’s teacher training and related problems. These can best be summarized by the following five terms: ambiguity, lack of awareness, stigma, fear, and denial.

- Ambiguity in defining equality in American society in general may also affect the way American academia and students themselves try to deal with differences among students. Is equality treating all equally with respect to opportunity and law, while disregarding unique individual needs? Or is equality acknowledging differences and treating people differently to make certain they have the same support to succeed as do their American peers? It comes down to the ultimate question of whether we should disregard differences to adhere to a liberal principle of equality or bend the principle to

acknowledge and accommodate differences.

- Departments with no tenured international professors or professors with no long-term overseas experiences or little exposure with international students during their own graduate training may be oblivious to the fact that IGA/IGSI face different challenges in addition to those of their American peers. For new IGA/IGSI, especially those from non-English speaking countries, learning and teaching in the U.S. is analogous to going through physical therapy after an injury. Until they acclimate to the American educational system, things they used to be able to do effortlessly in their home countries may require more attention, time, patience, and effort to perform even tentatively.
- Senior graduate students who are ready to teach have already gone through their initiation into the academic culture and learned that the academe is highly competitive. They are afraid that if they voice their concerns to their departments, those concerns will be construed as complaints or signs of lack of confidence and their teaching assignments may be taken away and given to their peers. For many IGA/IGSI, a graduate assistantship may be the only source of funding to complete their study; therefore they have to hold onto their positions no matter what. By law, they are not allowed to work off-campus without obtaining special permission from the Immigration and Custom Enforcement (formerly the INS). Even if permission is granted, working off-campus will not necessarily lead to their earning additional income as they are only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours *including* their on-campus job (their GA/GSI assignment.) Their off-campus employment is also contingent on their status of being continuously registered as a student. If they lose an assistantship and fail to register for class, they will also lose an opportunity to work off-campus to finance their education, which will probably end their dream of earning a degree.
- Most international students, even if they are underperforming in graduate seminars, have a strong belief that they are academically as good as or even better than American students. After all, they have overcome

numerous problems American students would never have to experience, so they are proud of their high academic achievements. For some, admitting they have a problem may be a sign of defeat, shame, inferiority, or incompetence that must be avoided at all cost. Therefore, many would rather swallow their problems rather than spit them out, so they tend to withdraw or deny that any problems exist.

## What Can We Do?

In addition to customary teaching assistant orientation before a new school year, there are some additional tips that may help new IGA/IGSI cope with their first-time teaching assignments.

### 1) Training Undergraduate Students

First of all, schools, in particular large public Research-1 Institutes, need to better disclose to incoming freshmen that graduate assistants/instructors rather than “real professors” often teach introductory classes. As 32% percent of all doctoral students in the U.S. come from international backgrounds, there is a good chance that undergraduate students will encounter international teaching assistants. At freshman and departmental orientations, students need to be taught how to deal with people from different countries as well as what to do if they have problems with their teaching styles. Communication is a two-way street: if students want to be treated with respect by the IGA/IGSI, they need to show respect to them as well.

Yet just telling these students to tolerate differences will help neither them nor the IGA/IGSI. First, new students must adjust to a new reality which they might not have faced in high school, that of having “ethnolinguistic minority speakers in positions of authority” (Rubin 1997, 150). If possible, the school should invite IGA/IGSI to freshman orientations and have them share their experience with undergraduate students, give examples of bad IGA-student relationships, or produce a skit of offensive attitudes or remarks that should not be tolerated in the classroom. Otherwise, students who lack multicultural or overseas experiences may not realize that they may be patronizing or ridiculing IGA/IGSI.

As with other U.S. universities, the University of Connecticut offers a First Year Experience (FYE) class to teach fundamental academic skills or life strategies to incoming freshmen. This year the FYE teaching staff incorporated articles on how to deal with IGA/IGSI, es-

pecially on how students should not make a quick linguistic stereotyping of their IGA/IGSI; the staff also experimented with focus groups. Although the teaching staff are still in the process of assessing the differences between the focus groups and other undergraduate students in terms of their relationships to IGA/IGSI, this kind of effort and training are the right steps toward providing students with information that they can also utilize in everyday social settings in today’s multicultural America.

In addition, undergraduates should be taught exactly where to register a complaint when they encounter problems with IGA/IGSI as well as with graduate assistants in general. Is it the dean’s office, the department, a particular designated professor, or a TA management office? Freshmen who are new to the confusing and occasionally contradictory school bureaucracy may not come up with a better idea on how to deal with a situation than sending an open letter to a campus newspaper.

### 2) Creating a One-Stop Shop Program

In addition to a customary teaching assistant orientation, a school should establish a permanent one-stop shop program designed especially for international teaching assistants (often called ITAP, or international teaching assistant programs) separate from general graduate assistant programs. Many public universities have established a resource and support center for IGA/IGSI; yet a particular program’s authority to enforce strict GA standards varies from institution to institution, with their actual enforcement ranging from advisory to mandatory. In some cases where ITAP exist only formally, they may be ineffective in training international students, which may result in the numerous complaints from frustrated undergraduate students that prompt legislators like Grande to intervene in university affairs. Because of budget concerns, some universities do not even offer an independent program for international students.

If either of these situations is the case, then establishing even an ad-hoc departmental committee that meets when problems arise would reduce the burden on faculty members while serving the students in need. IGA/IGSI would make an appointment with a committee consisting of an international faculty or a faculty with overseas experience, their academic advisors, a GA management staff member or university specialist who deals with the pedagogical aspect of graduate student teacher training, an upperclass

undergraduate student who has had several IGA/IGSI in the past, and, if necessary, a resident clinically licensed social worker or psychologist who is trained in cross-cultural communications. An ESL (English as a Second Language) instructor/professor may be useful as well. If the department cannot provide a faculty member who fits the multicultural description, a faculty member in a similar discipline (e.g. sociology, history, or economics) would suffice. Such a committee should not be considered as an official hearing process involving sanctions, but rather as an informal brainstorming session to improve IGA/IGSI’s teaching skills while lessening cultural misunderstanding. Finally, the existence of such a committee should be publicized during international student orientations, graduate student and departmental orientations, as well as in departmental graduate student handbooks and on university and departmental web sites. In fostering a cultural awareness among new IGA/IGSI, it is most important to emphasize that seeking assistance is considered acceptable in the U.S.

### 3) Hosting Interdepartmental Brown Bags/Workshops for IGA/IGSI

Different from the one-stop shop committee, the brown bag meeting is designed to teach IGA/IGSI how to incorporate their unique non-American experiences into teaching political science or its sister disciplines in social sciences. Collaboration with some sister disciplines is desirable to increase the number of students who participate so as to make the meetings successful. These informal discussions should be led by international faculty members or senior IGA/IGSI who have some teaching experience. It is relatively easy to incorporate non-American or non-Western experiences into Comparative Politics and International Relations. For example, I use my McDonald’s experience (i.e., that I had never had a McDonald’s hamburger until I went to Tokyo at age 18) in teaching modernization and Westernization as well as Westoxication. For average non-Westerners, eating a McDonald’s hamburger, listening to Mariah Carey, and wearing Levis’ jeans are all construed as proud signs of progress, however misguided that may be. Incredibly, when I first had my McDonald’s, I felt I had become somebody important and I bragged about it to my hometown friends for days. Incorporating personal experiences and testimonies should be encouraged as long as they are academic-or research-related, such as providing first-hand accounts of the collapse of the Berlin Wall or

the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, experiencing the diverse meanings of wearing an Islamic headscarf, etc. It would be beneficial if experienced international faculty members could share with IGA/IGSI their tricks on how to incorporate their experiences and different vantage points into other subfields, such as Political Theory, and Public Administration—subfields that are, at a quick glance, more difficult to incorporate non-U.S. or non-Western perspectives into than Comparative Politics or IR.

#### 4) Ensuring Fairness in IGA/IGSI Evaluations

In general, undergraduate students form impressions that IGA/IGSI are less approachable, less articulate, and less enthusiastic than their American counterparts (Rubin 1997). These sentiments are consistent with the pattern in which students in predominantly White colleges perceive and evaluate Black professors (Hendrix 1998). Whether these impressions are fairly accurate reflections of reality is a different matter. Numerous studies indicate that these perceptions, or, more precisely, that developing such perceptions, are susceptible to factors that are not directly related to the IGA/IGSI's English proficiency or pedagogical skills; nationality, ethnicity, and even physical attractiveness determine the state of ingroupness or outgroupness of speakers and affect students' *forming perception* of IGA/IGSI's English proficiency, sociolinguistic stereotypes, and overall competency (Smith et al. 2002; Munro and Derwing 1995). In other words, when students *perceive* the IGA/IGSI to be more foreign, they *feel* they hear heavier accents than speakers actually have (Rubin 1977). Because of these preconceptions, many IGA/IGSI start from a negative point rather than from zero, as their American counterparts do, in students' evaluations and GA/GSI-student relationships. Under such circumstances, a standard practice of distributing teaching assignments among the GA/GSI simply based on students' ratings seems unfair to some IGS and IGSI who may have superb pedagogical skills and warm personalities that go unnoticed by undergraduate students. To ensure fairness it is essential that faculty members who are in charge of graduate evaluations take turns and physically visit classrooms and evaluate *all* GA/GSI rather than relying on student evaluations that may be tainted by race/socio-linguistic biases and stereotypes. At the same time, it is important to raise awareness

among faculty members and graduate students that such intangible and exogenous factors may affect the way they perceive their IGA/IGSI and international job candidates at their first meetings.

### Survival Guide for First-Time IGA/IGSI: What You Need to Know

If departments and undergraduate students have done their share, then it is time IGA/IGSI also did their part. The following are the secrets of my trade which I have learned by doing. Because teaching is never a one-size-fits-all activity, my advice may not work for different groups of students at different schools. But I believe these four pieces of advice have universal aspects that will help new and inexperienced IGA/IGSI create a mutually beneficial learning environment with undergraduate students.

#### 1) Take Time to Introduce Yourself and Make Yourself Approachable

This is only common sense, but often IGA/IGSI forget to take this part of the process seriously. Undergraduate students (especially first semester students) who lack previous exposure to non-native-English speaking instructors (other than foreign language instructors) do not know quite what to expect from "foreigners." Many of these students consider you a foreigner with a funny accent and a funny unpronounceable name with whom they may not be able to identify. Although they may not mean to offend, many may not be able to locate your country of origin on a world map (or worse, may never have heard of it). They may think you just came to the United States a couple of days ago in time for the new semester and have no understanding of the American academic system, the school's mission statement, their busy social life, or that having a mischievous dog can be an excuse for not submitting an assignment on time in America.

First, you need to let your undergraduate students know your background, your academic history, your knowledge about the university, etc., not all at once but gradually throughout the semester. Make certain they know that you are aware of what is going on across campus. Reading a student newspaper is useful in keeping up-to-date on student life in general at your school. Learn the American art of small talk, including keeping a stock of jokes. Before each class, take time to discuss political affairs in general or even your private life or sports to make

yourself more approachable. Because of my considerable knowledge about college basketball at a place where it is a semi-religion (the University of Connecticut) and my practical use of basketball terms to conduct classroom instruction (e.g. "shot-clock violation" for students who cannot stop talking, and "point guards" for discussion group leaders), students perceive me not as an unapproachable alien but as just another nutty Connecticut basketball fan who cannot help connecting everything with basketball and who even draws life lessons from basketball games. It is your responsibility to have students understand you are not a foreigner first but an average guy who knows a lot about political science.

#### 2) Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

Even after you have successfully introduced yourself to your undergraduate students and persuaded them that you are not an alien, you will still end up having a bad day or two. Undergraduate students may laugh in your face at your funny pronunciation of jargon or grammatical errors. I always tell the unfortunate IGA/IGSI who have experienced these problems not to get offended, as you cannot survive in academia without having a thick skin. (In short, if you do not have one, then grow one.) Just ignore the comments, or, if you are rather inquisitive, ask the students what you just said or how you pronounced it. Laugh with them and learn from them. For example, your students may prejudge and tacitly assume you are academically inept and voice their concerns or register complaints just to upset you or to have fun at your expense. Again, do not get offended. Have a sense of humor.

Four years ago, I had a notoriously disruptive 45-year-old non-traditional student in my Introduction to Political Theory course who criticized me in class: "I don't think you know much about political theory." Being only a second semester instructor then and having long been aware that I was not a direct descendant of Socrates, I did not feel particularly offended, nor did I have an urge to shout back. Rather, I said: "Yeah, that's what I worry about every day." Students who are used to a barrage of my self-deprecating jokes immediately started laughing—including the 45-year-old student. Occasionally, he still tried my patience; however, I never took it personally and always made a joke out of it. Because of my handling of this student, I received an excellent evaluation from my students, who thanked me for keeping peace in class.

### 3) It Is Never Too Late to Learn Something New

You may be a 40-year-old visiting scholar from abroad on a GA payroll or you may have years of teaching experience in your home country, but there is always something new to learn. After all, you are playing by new rules. Do not assume it is too late to improve your teaching, language, or pronunciation skills. Many schools have special supplemental English classes for IGA/IGSI for a modest fee or pedagogy classes/workshops for GA/GSI in general. Take advantage of them as often as you can. If you think you are too old to study the ABCs again with young IGA/IGSI, then take a private or semi-private lesson with an ESL tutor for accent modification (in my area this costs somewhere between \$35 and \$50 per hour). Even if you speak near-perfect English or have lived for years in other English-speaking countries, modifying your accent to the American style will help your students understand you more easily. If you speak English perfectly, then adding some local flavor (e.g. a Boston accent in New England) will make you even more approachable to students. If your school does not have ESL classes or tutors, then look for one at a nearby community college. If you live in a remote town where there are no ESL teachers or community colleges, then go online. Look for a program in which the telephone as well as the computer is used as a means of instruction and evaluation.

### 4) Be a Role Model

Perhaps you may not have a universal appeal to students because of how you look, speak, or even dress. Do not be discouraged. There is another great way to connect with your students: be a role model. There are always some students in your class who will look up to you regardless of your nationality, color, gender, or other ascriptive characteristics, just because of who and what you are. Allow your students to get to know you.

I always tell my students they can be anything they want if they work hard. I tell them that even though people often assume students from Japan are wealthy, I, in fact, came from an economically disadvantaged background. My undergraduate advisor at my first school in Japan told me not to even think about going to graduate school because I did not have the money. In addition, English is not my first language. I have *become* a minority and developed a Duboisian double-consciousness, so that I now understand how overt and covert prejudices and racial discrimination affect one's self-esteem and confidence.

Away from home with nothing to fall back on, I always had to be the player, cheerleader, and coach at the same time to handle ups and downs in my life. I always feel and therefore pressure myself to work three times harder than American students to prove myself and gain recognition. But here I am, against all odds, teaching at a university in the U.S. I am an example of survival, resilience,

determination, and the rewards of hard work—and so are you.

You are a survivor. You chose a hard way to pursue your goal. Because you are an example of hard work and success, your story is inspirational, especially to those students in your class who have their own dreams to pursue. Take time and reflect on your life. Show your students that you paid your dues. But remember, you are nobody in this country until you prove yourself. You might have been the best student or the best instructor in your home country, but you are now playing a new game with new rules. Earn their respect.

In the end, your efforts and struggles are all worth it. Before I first started teaching, I asked myself “what if?” questions many times, even though I had had several semesters of GA experience. “Now I’m on my own. What if students don’t like me? What if I am not cut out for teaching?” Fortunately, all my worries evaporated and my efforts were rewarded when one of my students in her class evaluation gave me the touching reassurance that every first-time instructor hopes to hear: “For her first semester here, she did an excellent job.” While it may not be the highest evaluation an instructor could receive, the form still hangs on the wall in my study and will remain there for as long as I teach. I have since received far more flattering evaluations from many students; yet I do not want to replace my old evaluation on the wall, because it reminds me of how I started, and makes me proud of how far I have come.

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