



Credit: Michelangelo Landgrave

Cooling publication fever in under-represented graduate students

Graduate students suffer from publication fever, the all-encompassing feeling that they need to publish at all costs, argues Michel Landgrave. This single-minded focus puts them at risk of exploitation and increases hostility among peers. But great mentorship offers a way out.

I am an undocumented migrant, brought to the United States from Mexico at the age of two. Today, I am also a political science graduate student specializing in legislative studies. During my first year of graduate study, one point was repeatedly made to my cohort and me: if you want to stay in academia, you need to publish n articles. If you are outside a top program, you need double that number. If you come from an under-represented group, which I do, you need quadruple that number.

I do not disagree with the reality that under-represented graduate students need to publish to get a job, but I do disagree with the fever that has developed among graduate students to publish anything at any cost. This fever can lead to the exploitation of graduate students, increased departmental hostilities and the arrested development of graduate students as independent scholars.

I believe that faculty exploitation is particularly common towards minority, female and first-generation graduate students who do not know how to navigate academia. Advisors have an important role to play in protecting their students from this exploitation. I vividly recall meeting a senior scholar in my field for the first time when I was a first-year student. Within minutes of meeting me, they had dismissed my research interests and were trying to assign me research-assistant work. I remember another time when another senior scholar suggested that I use my 'Mexican' name on a project that we were collaborating on, so that my

colleague could appear to be working with a Mexican researcher. Never mind the fact that I was raised in the United States or that my name is of Italian origin. Both experiences occurred before I had an advisor to shield me.

The unreasonable pressure to publish also increases hostilities by discouraging cooperation. I have had several senior researchers advise me against sharing research ideas with those outside the department or research lab. Academia should be about the sharing and joint production of ideas, but publication fever discourages that.

What can be done? I do not think it possible, or even desirable, to go back to a time before publications were expected of graduate students. I believe that judging early-career scholars on their research is egalitarian insofar as it allows those from lower-ranking institutions to compete with those at the top. If there is a market for ideas, good ideas will ultimately prevail. There is value in encouraging early-career scholars to work on research.

A key step to addressing this problem is for advisors to provide their students with the resources to develop a clear independent research agenda instead of publishing as much as they can as the umpteenth author of a faculty member's project. Publications can help in the job market, but in the absence of an independent research agenda, I can't imagine early-career scholars sustaining themselves when they finish their graduate training.

Advisors are in the best position to try to address extreme publication pressure among students. Instead of seeing graduate students primarily as research assistants, they should be seen as mentees and provided with the resources to develop academically. I have been blessed with a great advisor who has provided me with resources to develop my own independent research agenda. I have never wanted for travel grants or research funds. When we meet, it is for my advisor to give me advice on my research, not unrelated research-assistant work. Most importantly, my advisor has treated me as a colleague. As a graduate student from an under-represented population, it is common to feel like a token, but with my advisor, I feel like a human being.

My advisor is not a particularly big name in my field who has a large NSF grant. He is a faculty member at a mid-ranked public university. If he can be such a great mentor, I don't see why others could not emulate his style. If I am ever fortunate enough to have graduate students of my own, I intend to pay forward my advisor's kindness. □

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