



# Constructive Politics of Political Geography: From Specialty Group to “Community of Practice”

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## Introduction

Particularly since the 1980s, the subdiscipline of political geography has expanded and evolved in terms of methods, practices, contaminations, theories, and methodologies. Supporting this growth has been the establishment of major journals such as *Political Geography* and organizations like the Political Geography Specialty Group (PGSG), one of the most successful of those created within the American Association of Geographers in the early 1980s to spur the growth of geography’s many subfields. The PGSG was one of the first to organize—in 1981, at the annual meeting in Los Angeles—and has been growing ever since. But what comes next? Continuing to advance along the frontiers of research and policy will be critical to the group’s continued success. To do this, we argue that much can be gained by focusing more explicitly on attracting, supporting, and mentoring our members across all career stages. Rather than hoping this type of socialization will happen on its own as the PGSG grows, we argue here for a more explicit approach borrowed from organizational theory termed a “Community of Practice” (CoP). Central to this theory is the not unexpected finding that newcomers learn best by immersion in a new community, absorbing its values and modes of action as they become members. The more important finding is, however, that this immersion works best if it is planned, guided, and valued (Lave and Wenger 1991). The

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implication is that professional development and mentorship is too important to be left to chance.

These insights stem from research into the way businesses, non-profit organizations, and government agencies create, retain, and transfer knowledge within their organizations. This includes the circulation of organization-specific knowledge and innovation among spatially dispersed units as well as transfer of know-how through time, from year to year and across generations. Given the size of major national and international corporations with hundreds of thousands of employees, particularly businesses in high-tech or knowledge-based fields, training and socializing new employees can be a major, non-stop challenge. Equally demanding can be the work of maintaining an organization's institutional knowledge—information, sometimes proprietary, about patents, products, processes, and procedures—and making sure that this information is carefully curated and made readily available to those needing access.

Organizations that rely on the careful curation and circulation of information and knowledge are sometimes called “learning communities” or “communities of practice.” Universities, as well as academic and scientific organizations, are often regarded as prototypical learning communities. Membership involves lengthy, rigorous training in disciplinary standards and practices and the knowledge base of science and scholarship dates back centuries. It is maintained and sustained through the ongoing work of journal and book publishers, professional societies, libraries, archivists, and librarians funded from a mix of public, commercial, and private sources. Given that the PGSG is part of this academic ecosystem, it may then seem a bit ironic to suggest that the specialty group can gain insights from research into CoPs.

We argue that it does, by improving socialization and mentorship in ways that will attract and support new members and help diversify membership. To do this, we focus on the value of supporting community members just beginning their careers—graduate students and early career faculty. Current graduate programs do offer excellent training, but new hires still sometimes feel that they are not effectively prepared in graduate school for such key duties as teaching undergraduates and conducting research (Berberet 2008, pp. 8–12). This may be due to the assumption that early career academics will pick up needed knowledge and skills as they move forward in their careers.

Unfortunately, this view plays into a “survival of the fittest” view of the early career period that graduate students and newly minted PhDs will either “sink-or-swim” based on their raw talent and drive. The basic assumption being if early career academics can't figure out how the system works on their own, they probably shouldn't pursue an academic career. Both Margolis (2001) and Lovitts (2001, 2007) are critical of this sort of harsh, survivalist trope. They note in their research that success in academic careers can sometimes hinge less on classes taken and degrees awarded, than on mastering a hidden curriculum: the implicit knowledge and expectations needed to succeed. If access to this hidden curriculum depends upon a person's gender, sexuality, age, family status, nationality, or other personal

characteristics, then career opportunities will be privileged by factors irrelevant to scholarly potential.

The broader implication is that efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion involve bringing hidden curricula to light. By making the implicit norms of academic life explicit, we can enfranchise a wider range of geographers, attract a greater variety of students, and open the discipline to a broader array of voices. This is especially important in political geography today. Whereas the field has made strides in gender equity in recent years, less progress has been made in promoting racial and ethnic diversity, and members may also be sidelined by sexuality, (dis)ability, ageism, and family status. Indeed, calls for greater inclusion of diverse theoretical approaches, representation and leadership, and reparative justice have produced “small steps” toward greater diversity and inclusion within the sub-discipline (see Ehrkamp et al. 2023; McKittrick 2020). Scholars from the global south are adding their voices to the debate and support is building for work at the intersection of political geography, feminist geography, and LGBTQ+ research, but more participation is needed. We argue that all of these endeavors can be supported by reconceptualizing the PGSG as a CoP.

We argue our case in the following four sections. The first highlights the success of the PGSG in setting the stage for future growth. The second section provides an overview of research on CoPs and highlights some of the ideas that can be applied to the work of the PGSG. The third section outlines four strategies for weaving professional development into departmental and disciplinary life. In closing, we argue that professional development should be viewed as a life-long, career-spanning process, not something confined to graduate school and the first years of an academic career. These changes can also offer other dividends as well, including support for new voices and research interests that will keep the PGSG moving forward.

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## Building on a Record of Success

The PGSG already has a strong record of promoting professional development within its community. These include activities that both provide a welcoming home for new members and promote good mentoring practices. One of the group’s strengths is that, from its start in 1981, it respected and encouraged methodological and theoretical pluralism. For example, many of the founders of the PGSG committed to avoiding letting a single political viewpoint dominate the new group, opting instead to emphasize inclusivity and encourage its members to organize a diverse range of sessions at the AAG conferences. This approach was also adopted the following year by the establishment of a new journal, *Political Geography Quarterly*, now *Political Geography*. Though the journal emerged separately from the specialty group, it too “welcomed a variety of research paradigms” (Taylor 1992, 6). While the meaning of pluralism in our subfield has changed through the years, particularly after “the paradigm-upending collapse of the Cold War and emergence of the Anthropocene as a problematic for thought” (Grove et al.

2022), new theories and epistemological questions continue to be welcomed and discussed. Examples include Sheppard et al. (2023) and Sara Smith's 2020 book on feminist political geographic approaches; Browne et al. (2007, 2017) and Nash (2010)'s LGBTQ+ spaces and queer geographies; Naylor et al. (2018), Bonilla (2020), and Sultana (2022) decolonial scholarship; and Jovan Lewis' 2023 plenary on anti-racist theories.

One of the most important developments was the creation of the first Political Geography Specialty Group Preconference in advance of the Los Angeles AAG meeting of 1988, which has continued annually since its inception. The PGSG and its preconference provides attendees with several benefits. Among the most important is the way it cultivates a culture of inclusion in which new participants are welcomed into the organization. The smaller size of the event, in comparison to the AAG annual meeting, creates a relaxed atmosphere that encourages informal discussion. Such discussions can be particularly rich because the interests of participants typically range across all the methodological, theoretical, and topical domains of the field and include participants across all career stages. Participants have the opportunity to gain feedback on their research, even projects in early stages. This promotes timely discussions on current and developing research by a large cross-section of political geographers, often resulting in richer research perspectives. Additionally, the "Meet the journal editors" sessions, with the editors of *Political Geography* and *Geopolitics*, are often lauded as tremendously helpful by students and early career participants alike. The preconference concludes with a dinner that further facilitates conversations related to research, mentoring, and academic collaboration.

A second notable aspect of the preconference is its stress on mentorship and building professional networks. As Nellis and Roberts (2009) argue, professional mentorship, including potential future research and writing collaborations among mentor and mentee, is essential to improving the early career experience and fostering productive research agendas and professional development. Many of the more established PGSG faculty are willing to offer feedback on research projects and proposals, teaching strategies, and other professional development issues. They also actively encourage students and early career faculty at the preconference to become more engaged in the subfield. Indeed, the two leadership positions of the PGSG (president and vice president) are reserved for an early career faculty. Furthermore, the PGSG Board and various PGSG committee appointments allow individuals to get involved, including graduate students and participants in non-tenure track appointments, thereby enriching the governance of the organization.

The specialty group continued to sponsor sessions during the annual geography meetings, but the preconferences allow organizers to schedule additional time and events to foster opportunities for greater dialogues between or after paper sessions. This includes a plenary lecture that highlights the work of a local researcher, particularly if the preconference is hosted on a nearby campus. Other events include a social hour, an annual dinner, and refreshment breaks to further encourage discussions and networking among attendees.

The PGSG also supports undergraduate and graduate students with funding for travel and research awards, as well as non-student research and outreach awards. For example, the Richard Morrill Engagement Award promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion by funding travel to participate in the preconference. This award is given to an individual who has used their political geographic work to affect change in the discipline of geography, public thought, or public policy.

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## Insights from Research on Communities of Practice

Given this strong record of community building, the PGSG already fits the description of put forward the key theorists Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder as:

groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis ... These people don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. (Wenger et al. 2002, pp. 4–5)

This is certainly an apt description of the PGSG as well as the AAG, the concept of a community of practice transcends the conventional notion of an academic discipline in at least two ways. CoPs are both more deliberative and more comprehensive.

By deliberative, we mean that CoPs encourage their members to make explicit the implicit knowledge that may prove crucial to success both for the individual and the community as a whole. This means paying greater attention to areas of work where expectations may be vague or confusing or particular problems or barriers that are difficult for people to overcome. For example, recent books by Gooblar in *The Missing Course* (2019) and Zimmerman in *Amateur Hour* (2020) point out that most new faculty in the United States receive very little training related to teaching, learning, and course planning, even though teaching is one of the most important roles faculty play, and often one of the most stressful. Similarly, Cassuto and Weisbuch in *The New PhD* (2021) and Lovitts in *Leaving the Ivory Tower* (2001) draw attention to other types of implicit knowledge that are hidden to some students, revealed to others. These are steps along the paths toward masters and doctoral degrees that can result in the most confusion (and attrition) among students. This isn't just a matter of students asking the right questions, or having the right advisor. Instead, as Lovitts (2007) found in an extensive survey of faculty across ten disciplines in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, there is little consistency in what faculty judge to be successful dissertations in their disciplines and little interest in developing standards for evaluating the quality of dissertations in fields. With so many key steps toward success left vague, students and early career faculty are left to sink or swim as they navigate disciplinary norms.

By comprehensive, we mean that CoPs usually take a broader, life-course perspective on success. This means seeing professional development as more than a person's academic credentials or certificates from "one-and-done" workshops. Instead, professional development needs to be viewed as a process that adds value at all career stages. This is accomplished by exposing participants to diverse perspectives and different forms of participation. This also means making efforts to grow existing networks and focusing on value for the community across the members' entire careers. Wenger et al. (2002, pp. 49–64) highlight some of the strategies that help to achieve this goal by:

1. Opening a dialog between inside and outside perspectives.
2. Inviting different levels of participation.
3. Developing both public and private community spaces for sharing and learning.
4. Focusing on value to the community and community members.
5. Combining familiarity with excitement so that routines are supported, but also varied to keep topics fresh and interesting.
6. Creating a rhythm for the community so that it has a sense of energy and movement to keep members involved.

Much has been written about how to use these ideas to create and sustain CoPs (Cox and Richlin 2004; Lave and Wenger 1991; Mullen 2009; Wenger 1998). Interestingly, many of the successful case studies cited in this literature focus on how CoP can help learners and educators cooperate across distances and institution types (Kimble et al. 2008)—the types of sharing that might be useful to political geographers who themselves spread around the entire globe. Five avenues for development seem to offer the greatest promise.

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## Avenues for Development

First, a CoPs perspective can focus attention on strategies for addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity (DEI) goals in political geography. A recent strategic plan developed by the AAG highlighted the importance of embedding these efforts in programming at the national level, efforts with individual departments, and reaching out to broader constituencies (AAG 2021). This implies that DEI initiatives may be advanced in PGSG with activities on a number of fronts.

Possible strategies include developing a diversity and retention plan, showcasing inclusion, monitoring departmental (or other academic units) progress toward diversity, and engaging with diverse Community Organizations (Solis and Ng 2012; Jordan et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2022; Howitt 2022; Hillis 1998). Departments can build on established university-wide diversity policies and tailor them to best support the specific needs of faculty, staff, and students (Solis and Ng 2012). Displaying examples of diversity within one's own program via websites and social media platforms can celebrate inclusion and stimulate recruitment. Departments should also "establish applicable policies and procedures, thereby

institutionalizing their inclusion initiatives” in order to clearly articulate goals and monitor progress toward increasing diversity (Jordan et al. 2022, p. 391). Other strategies include collaborating with applicable local Community Organizations to offer diverse research and partnership opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and “citizen scholars.”

Second, among the strategies for advancing DEI goals is to focus attention on enabling success in the early career period, from graduate school through the first 5–10 years beyond. This is because, as was mentioned above, many newly hired faculty report that they do not feel prepared to initiate new research projects and teach at the college level (Foote 2010; Columbia University 2016). CoPs research indicates the value of developing a community-based approach to providing these types of support. This effort would, for example, emphasize a shared desire for teaching excellence, such as the collaborative development and sharing of innovative teaching materials made more easily accessible through the PGSG preconference and web. Such skills are often not covered in graduate school, thereby privileging some to the detriment of others (Misra et al. 2021).

While there are many helpful resources that examine how to support a diverse departmental environment (American Association of Geographers 2022; Alberts and Hazen 2013), more can be done to involve a broad range of participants and topics (Nadal 2019). As the training and support that is available to graduate students and newly appointed faculty is varied (i.e., unique to a specific institution), the political geography community has an opportunity to address this unevenness through sub-disciplinary focused training programs. For example, the PGSG can tailor established projects such as the Trellis Project (UCGIS) or NSF ADVANCE grants to more effectively train and mentor political geographers. Other programs that could be adapted to focus on the subdiscipline and are well-positioned to better prepare political geographers for effective teaching in an increasingly diverse university environment include the Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFF) that trains doctoral students on teaching and learning methodologies, including effective course design, teaching pedagogies, and techniques for fostering effective class discussions. Indeed, a culture of support can welcome a diverse range of voices when educators “understand, acknowledge, and support students who both possess and express diverse perspectives...and make positive change in their courses” (Solem et al. 2009, p. 68).

Third, mid-career faculty can also benefit from greater support. After facing the pressures of earning tenure, some faculty have difficulty developing post-promotion career plans and may experience this period as one of burnout, disengagement, and malaise (Baldwin et al. 2005; Huston et al. 2007; Jaschik 2012; Kenyon 2020). This is because newly promoted faculty may face a host of new questions for which they have received little guidance from their universities or colleagues: should they embark on new projects or continue those that earned them promotion; pursue leadership or administrative opportunities; invest in new courses and teaching rotations; or build their careers and contribute to their program in other ways? Available research suggests the need for more coaching

and mentoring than is currently practiced (Baldwin et al. 2008; Mathews 2014; Mulholland 2020; Setiya 2017; Weimer 2017).

These points all suggest the need for better professional development across all career stages. The political geography community has an opportunity to address this deficit through a range of targeted professional development programs. Indeed, there are geography/geoscience training workshops that could serve as a model for our subdiscipline. For example, the AAG offers a number of online training seminars and webinars (a series of events, summer workshops—short and longer), that could be adapted for political geographers that focus on careers and jobs, new and innovative research methodologies, hot topics and issues, leadership issues, keynote events, networking and discussion opportunities to build community among grads, undergrads, and others (e.g., AAG Summer Series). The UCGIS offers graduate workshops to support first-generation, BIPOC or foreign-born women, such as its 2022 offering, “*How to Navigate and Chart a Course Forward for Women + Graduate Students in GIScience*” ([uwmass.edu/gradwings.com](http://uwmass.edu/gradwings.com)). Similar subdiscipline focused offerings could complement the preconference and create a program of year-round activities focusing on current and evolving topics.

Fourth, personal and professional lives must be considered together in professional development. Recent reports suggest that an ever-increasing emphasis on publications and external grant funding over mentorship, work-life balance, and mental health is negatively impacting faculty and graduate students (Bartlett et al. 2021; Moran et al. 2020). For example, “Research focused on the higher education sector has revealed that poor work–life balance can result in lower productivity and impact, stifled academic entrepreneurship, lower career satisfaction and success, lower organizational commitment, intention to leave academia, greater levels of burnout, fatigue and decreased social interactions, and poor physical and mental health, which has become increasingly prevalent among graduate students” (Aarnikoivu et al. 2019). This is also true for faculty at all career stages who increasingly report a significant time deficit in their lives for family and personal hobbies (Bothwell 2018). These issues are perhaps most notable academics from underrepresented backgrounds who often are tasked with extra service work or employment duties that often go unacknowledged or uncompensated (Lewis 2016).

In order to address this one-sidedness, a CoP can help political geographers foster effective practices to balance one’s personal life and professional career in a manner that may be mutually enhancing. In *Aspiring Academics*, the authors “illustrate how personal and professional goals and strengths can be brought together and pursued. We highlight the importance of reflection and planning, linking self-assessment with the articulation of specific developmental goals and activities. In so doing, we pay special attention to the synergy among service, teaching, and research” (Solem et al. 2009, p. 30). For example, political geographers can tailor The American Association of University Professors published issue that explores balancing a career and one’s personal life (AAUP 2014). As academic work has a strong tendency to be extremely time consuming, it would be beneficial for the subdiscipline to encourage and support colleagues and push for institutional



changes that foster healthy work-life balances—one that encourages collaboration, selective service commitments, and reasonable prioritization of one’s personal life.

We noted in the previous section how the needs of mid-career faculty can change as they progress in their careers, and late-career faculty may also face new concerns involving family, health, and financial issues. Although children can be grown, one’s partner or parents may now need care, even while that person’s own health may be declining. Finances may also cause stress as people face unanticipated medical and family expenses. Very little has been written about how these stresses might be addressed by senior faculty in ways that can help them make positive contributions to research, teaching, and service right up to their retirements.

Fifth, networking and mentoring are essential for success because it can foster a sense of belonging within a department or subdiscipline. The PGSG already does a good job of mentoring new and early career members, but efforts might benefit from being more deliberate and comprehensive. Rather than leaving these efforts to chance based on a person’s home program, the specialty group can encourage newly appointed faculty to solicit the information and advice needed to advance in their institutions. Our group can take a more active role to serve as mentors to those outside our departments in a concerted effort to help enhance the quality of our new colleagues’ teaching and research, offer candid advice and guidance, and foster their successful development as professionals.

This can be an important avenue of support for our colleagues from unrepresented backgrounds as the majority of the US academy remains predominantly white and male. Many international academics, in addition to commonly experiencing cultural dislocation and language issues, also face systematic and damaging effects of racism (Alberts and Hazen 2013, p. xiii). Researchers that examine LGBTQ+ people of color within academia report that these individuals commonly experience “multiple oppressed identities may lead to complex systemic and interpersonal discrimination, negatively impacting an array of social, psychological, educational, legal, and health outcomes” (Nadal 2019, p. 2). Recent reports suggest that female faculty continue to face discrimination within academia, particularly in regard to their tenure and promotion (Kelly 2019). Therefore, a CoP within the subdiscipline can help support and encourage individuals who may face various forms of explicit or implicit discrimination in the workplace. This is especially true as “most early career faculty find themselves under pressure to teach well, but without the concepts and tools needed...the sense of pressure seems to increase as they try to make do with improvised solutions” (Solem et al. 2009, 66). Without help or mentorship, research suggests that many faculty can adopt ad hoc strategies and do not take the time to critically analyze their teaching methodology or student-centered learning goals (Fink and Ganus 2009).

We stress issues of networking and mentoring because they can help reach the other four goals we’ve outlined. Sometimes, the best way to appreciate their importance is to think back to how important they have been in our own careers. In thinking back on her own career path, Dempsey acknowledges that she benefited greatly from the networking and mentoring relationships she has developed

from graduate school onward. In terms of her teaching, she was able to solicit course-specific advice and feedback from mentors she met during the PGSG preconference. Generous colleagues offered to discuss course design, readings, as well as assignment and exam development. With this valuable support and subdiscipline-specific guidance, her new course quickly became established course offerings in her department. The mentorship she received from established PGSG faculty also proved fundamental to establishing her research and writing agenda. Contributing to her research, established colleagues generously offered to brainstorm new methodologies, provide feedback on early draft manuscripts, and serve as contacts for field projects. Mentorship and successful networking also helped her to successfully navigate the tenure process.

Thus, mentorship of colleagues' post-tenure can help individuals recognize when they are prepared for promotion (or we can help them create a pathway to arrive at that point). By enfranchising a greater variety of participants in our subdiscipline, we work to forge a greater and more inclusive community. We challenge everyone, at all stages of their academic career, to focus on mentorship as a generation-spanning activity. This includes mentoring the mentors to help solidify how we all have an important role to play as supportive members of the political geography community.

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## **Conclusion: Building Community, Changing Culture**

Political geography and geographers will always be judged by their contributions to scholarship and policy making and across the full breadth of the field (O'Loughlin 2018). Our point is that viewing the PGSG as a CoP can help the subdiscipline increase this impact by attracting and supporting new members into a community of practice. We advocate building on the PGSG's already strong record of success, by focusing attention on five key areas of community building that can support students and faculty across all stages of career development. This means keeping our eyes on the goals of our scholarship, but acknowledging explicitly the critical role that community building and everyday human interactions can have in reaching these goals.

Our suggestions challenge some of established assumptions within academic culture, graduate student training, and the relative value assigned to different facets of academia life (Foote 2010). In particular, we see the value in challenging the sink-or-swim model of academic development that sustains power relations and assumptions that privilege certain individuals while disenfranchising others. We see paths toward change focusing especially on efforts to: increase levels of diversity, equity, and inclusion; support programs for early career and mid-career faculty; acknowledge and support the points of intersection between our personal and professional lives; and build on the mentoring and networking that has long been a feature of the PGSG. We see these steps as a way to make explicit the implicit skills and acquired wisdom necessary for a successful career for students and faculty at any stage in their careers.

In this way, a supportive CoP will enfranchise a great range of voices, including women, international students and faculty, LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented groups that can help to enrich and diversify the methods, debates, and practices utilized within political geography. Indeed, organizing new mentorship programs, teaching workshops, and research conferences within the subdiscipline would foster greater attention on significant, emerging topics that may benefit from teamwork and collaboration. This could enable new opportunities for innovation such as establishing a periodic publication that discusses current research challenges, debates, or methodologies in political geography to highlight a sustained engagement focused CoP's successes and paths to future development.

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