



Understanding, Discussing, and Embodying Leadership Through Graduate Student Government

Laura Vaughn, Florida State University

Kyanna Austin, Florida State University

The Congress of Graduate Students at Florida State University is an example of how the facilitation of graduate student government opportunities allow for the development of leadership and followership within graduate students. While scholarship has focused on how leadership learning can be facilitated through student government for undergraduate students, graduate student development should not be overlooked. This scholarship-to-practice brief will provide an overview of the Congress of Graduate Students under the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy, how theories on advising and leadership facilitate graduate student understandings of leadership and followership, and give recommendations on how other programs can work to encourage the development of leadership within graduate students through student government participation.

Introduction

Student government has been a way for students to connect with leadership and become empowered to be a part of shared governance within U.S. higher education since the 1700s (May, 2010). While student government has generally been focused on undergraduate students, graduate student government provides opportunities for graduate students to engage with shared governance and develop leadership identity, capacity and efficacy within their experiences. This scholarship-to-practice brief will share how the Congress of Graduate Students (COGS) at Florida State University works to empower graduate students to engage with the wider campus community and develop their own abilities and self-efficacy when it comes to viewing themselves as both a leader and follower. In recent years, the Congress, with the support of the Office of Student Government and Advocacy, has been working to raise the voices of graduate students and collaborate with campus offices to improve visibility and advocacy across campus. This has required many representatives within the Congress to both step up as leaders at times and to be responsible followers to make sure that those in leadership positions are taking responsible actions for the good of graduate students on campus.

Overview of Student Governance and Advocacy

The Office of Student Governance and Advocacy fosters opportunities for students' personal and professional growth by encouraging leadership, amplifying their voices, guiding the management of funds and resources, and supporting their active engagement in the community. This office operates under the Department of Student Engagement, whose vision is to be a national and international exemplar in programming that develops students and staff into critical thinkers and responsible global citizens who make a positive impact on the world. Aligned with this vision, the Department of Student Engagement's mission is to educate, inspire, and empower the student body by fostering change, raising awareness, and building confidence. Through innovative, interdisciplinary, and co-curricular experiences, the department provides leadership development and community involvement opportunities. By empowering students and student organizations to lead their own initiatives, advisors strengthen their connection to campus and enhance their sense of belonging. Additionally, through collaboration, advisors promote student leadership and support the growth of organizations at Florida State University. To fulfill this mission, advisors are guided by core values, including:

- Nurturing Meaningful Connections
- Inclusiveness and Diversity of Thought
- Leadership and Innovation
- Holistic Learning Opportunities
- Continuous Assessment and Evaluation
- Exceptional Student Experiences and Engagement

The Department of Student Engagement is home to three offices, one of which is Student Governance and Advocacy (SG&A). SG&A focuses on supporting the leadership of Student Government Association (SGA) groups, including the Congress of Graduate Students (COGS). The SG&A office provides administrative and advisory support to graduate student leaders, ensuring they have the tools and resources to succeed. Our advising philosophy is grounded in evidence-based models that prioritize creating spaces where students feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and support. Research by Schlossberg et al. (1989) underscores the importance of students feeling like they matter, which is at the core of our approach. To achieve this, advisors integrate the following advising models:

1. **The Relational Advising Model:** This model emphasizes building trust-based, supportive relationships with students. By actively listening, providing personalized guidance, and fostering open communication, advisors help students navigate challenges and identify their goals (Lowenstein, 2005).
2. **Appreciative Advising Framework:** Rooted in positivity and collaboration, this model involves six key phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. Advisors use this framework to empower graduate student leaders to explore their strengths, envision possibilities, and develop actionable plans for success (Bloom, et al., 2008).
3. **Developmental Advising:** Advisors encourage graduate students to take ownership of their personal and professional development. This involves helping students reflect on their

experiences in COGS, identify areas for growth, and set leadership goals that align with their aspirations (Crookston, 1972).

By combining these models, advisors ensure that our graduate student leaders in COGS feel supported holistically. This approach not only strengthens their confidence and competence but also equips them to make meaningful contributions to student life at Florida State University. Involvement in student government is among the most impactful experiences for developing practical competence, as noted by Kuh & Lund (1994). Through participation in COGS, graduate students gain valuable skills and experiences that prepare them to lead both within and beyond the university setting.

Advisors within the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy also put into practice the Situational Leadership Model found under the leadership Contingency Theory. In the late 1960s, Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard developed the Situational Leadership Model, which illustrates the interdependence between leaders and followers within group settings. The model stresses that the role leaders should play in order to be most effective depends on the amount of direction leaders deliver, the amount of socio-emotional support they give to followers, and the maturity or readiness of followers to complete specific tasks (Hersey et al., 1996). To support the leadership development of representatives and the executive team within COGS, advisors within the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy use the following aspects of the model:

1. **Follower Readiness:** In Situational Leadership, follower readiness refers to a follower's ability and willingness to accomplish a particular task. By building rapport and understanding the skill level of our leaders advisors better position them to approach tasks. (Hughes, et al., 1998).
2. **Leader Behaviors:** Situational leadership theory maintains that leaders who correctly base their behaviors on follower maturity will be more effective, whereas the contingency model suggests that leader effectiveness is primarily determined by selecting the right kind of leader for a certain situation or changing the situation to fit the particular leader's style. As advisors guide students to work with different departments around campus, it is important for us to be able to recognize which situations better work for the leaders and their comfort level when initiating meetings etc. (Hersey et al., 1996)
3. **Situational Favorability:** The other critical variable in the contingency model is situational favorability, which is the amount of control the leader has over the followers. Presumably, the more guidance a leader has over followers, the more favorable the situation is, at least from the leader's perspective. Leader-member relations is the most powerful of the three subelements in determining overall situation favorability. It involves the extent to which relationships between the leader and followers are generally cooperative and friendly or antagonistic and difficult. When helping our leaders create their executive boards or delegate tasks it is important that they know how to build a good cohesive environment (Hersey et al., 1996).

Overview of the Congress of Graduate Students

The Congress of Graduate Students has been in existence for about 30 years at Florida State University and was created in order to give graduate students a greater voice and representation on campus. As stated on the official website:

As the body representing graduate students, COGS represents graduate student interests to the university and community, and is empowered to issue resolutions expressing the views of graduate students and calling attention to important issues. The Congress provides graduate students with grants for conference travel, and funds programs and activities across campus that are targeted at graduate students (Congress of Graduate Students, n.d.).

COGS is governed by a Code that can be adjusted and updated as needed through bills and resolutions so that the Congress stays relevant to student needs and continues benefiting graduate students on campus. The Congress is led by an executive board that currently includes a Speaker, Deputy Speaker of Finance, Deputy Speaker of Communications, Deputy Speaker of Judicial Affairs, and Deputy Speaker of Advocacy. The representatives within the Congress are made up of representatives from the 15 colleges and schools at Florida State University as well as representatives holding identity-based seats such as the International student advocate, LGBTQ+ student advocate, Minority student advocate, Veterans advocate, and other advocacy seats.

The Congress has several standing committees dedicated to serving different target areas. These Committees include the Student Advocacy Committee that works to support students concerning various issues across campus, the Student Outreach Committee which works to organize events and collaborations with different offices across campus, and the Internal Affairs committee which revises and updates COGS Code and deals with more legislative issues before they are presented to the larger congress. There are also two seasonal committees with targeted purposes: the Budget Committee puts together the annual budget for the next academic year and the Strategic Planning Committee sets up a strategic plan for COGS to follow for the next few years which helps keep consistency among changing leadership each year. Over the past several decades, COGS has had waves of success and failures concerning its operations and practices. Some years have allowed COGS to be agents of change when it comes to graduate student support and in other years, COGS has faced issues of unclear leadership and poor communication. There are several factors contributing to these fluctuations including a lack of leadership from executive members, failed followership by student representatives, fluctuations in administrative and staff support, and no adherence to the COGS Code.

Participation and Growth of COGS since COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic created the most recent fluctuations within the operations of COGS. With everything suddenly moving to an online format, student organizations having to cut back on events, and professional conferences either being canceled or being held digitally, COGS faced challenges on how to adjust to the new normal for the next year or two. This re-adjustment led to several issues stemming from both unclear leadership and poor followership by representatives either leaving the Congress or failing to practice due diligence concerning bills and resolutions.

Advising staff turnover during this time meant another system of checks and balances was not in place to provide additional oversight and guidance.

As COVID-19 eventually settled into a new normal and campus opened back up, the newly elected executive board of COGS was faced with issues of a bad campus reputation, a large number of open representative seats, several budget discrepancies, and other issues that put COGS in a difficult position. The issues within COGS led to some concerns from administrators, staff, and members of student government on if COGS should be supported and provided with the current level of funding. However, the new leadership of COGS had a vision to make the Congress a place to provide resources to graduate students and let their voices be heard. The executive board worked closely together with the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy to first handle the financial issues that were mismanaged the previous year along with working to recruit new representatives to fill the empty seats. The Office of Student Governance and Advocacy hired new advisors to support student government organizations, including the Congress, to develop leadership skills and social responsibility. Executive board leaders worked to connect to various offices on campus to improve communication and fix the reputation of COGS that had been damaged over the pandemic. An emphasis was also placed on representatives understanding the COGS Code and Financial Manual with the expectation set that representatives should challenge any bills or decisions made that did not match the requirements of both documents. Training sessions were held at the start of each new semester to make sure that representatives understood all regulating documents and felt empowered to challenge bills or resolutions they did not support. This fostering of both responsible leadership and followership empowered those within the Congress to work to create a supportive environment for graduate students.

When looking at the Congress of Graduate Students today, a majority of the seats have been filled with representatives, the reputation of the Congress has improved among departments due to increased outreach such as presenting at over 24 departmental orientations, and there is a clear understanding of both structural and funding guidelines by all representatives. There are clear goals the Congress is working toward concerning graduate student advocacy and being a true representation of the graduate student body. Part of these improvements has also been due to support from advisors within the Student Governance & Advocacy Office who have helped to facilitate leadership learning within the Congress of Graduate Students.

Facilitating Graduate Student Leadership Efficacy and Sense of Belonging

Through the work of rebuilding the Congress of Graduate Students, both the executive board and the representatives were able to grow their own leadership efficacy. Leadership efficacy is the belief a person has in their own ability to complete a task or to practice leadership (Bandura, 1997). This is different from leadership capacity which is viewed as the skills someone has to complete a task (Dugan, 2017). For example, within COGS, representatives have been empowered to take actions against injustices shown toward graduate students on campus. One of these injustices was wording within the student handbook which stated a full time graduate student would be enrolled in 12 hours when the reality is that most programs consider full time to be 9 hours. The GI Bill requires veteran students to be enrolled full time in order to get their full funding and this wording error was causing veteran graduate students to not be given their full benefits. Working together as a

leadership can be facilitated in a way that benefits not only graduate students, but the overall campus environment.

Institutions

The Congress of Graduate Students at Florida State University has provided opportunities for graduate students to be more engaged with student programming and to be engaged with student government on campus. The authors encourage other institutions to have more inclusion of graduate student programming within student government even if you do not have a graduate student government association like COGS. For institutions that do not offer graduate student government associations, the authors encourage you to consider creating these organizations to help amplify graduate student voices on your campus. Graduate students are often overlooked within student affairs and tasks such as putting together activities are often pushed to the Graduate School which does not always have the staffing, support, or knowledge to put together those types of activities. COGS and similar programs intentionally provide safe spaces for graduate students to connect with peers in a place that is outside of their departments and classmates.

Institutions should work to facilitate programming such as leadership workshops specifically for graduate students in order to create opportunities for graduate students to meet each other. Many leadership workshops on campus are aimed at undergraduate students which can leave graduate students feeling excluded from this type of programming. These events allow graduate students to connect with others who might be going through their same struggles in other departments and provide an opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration. Putting together leadership workshops for graduate students also allows them to build their leadership and followership abilities in a space where they do not feel like an intruder within an undergraduate space. Graduate students are often siloed within their own departments without much opportunity or encouragement to explore the wider campus community. By encouraging the development and engagement of graduate student programming and associations such as graduate student government, this provides spaces for graduate students to break out of their silos and connect with their campuses.

Advisors

Advisors who work with graduate student governments play a unique role—not only as guides and institutional liaisons but also as advocates, mentors, and consistent supporters. Graduate students navigate leadership in the midst of academic, professional, and often personal transitions. Effective advising requires both strategic support and deep relational care. The authors have several core recommendations for advisors looking to strengthen their impact. First, advisors should support autonomy through trust. Graduate students benefit most when given the space to lead, create, and govern in ways that reflect their needs and values. Advisors should resist the urge to over-manage and instead offer students the freedom to structure their own processes, build their own teams, and lead their own initiatives. In our experience, offering that autonomy fosters reciprocal trust—students feel respected and, in turn, are more likely to seek collaboration and guidance when needed. The advisor's role becomes that of a steady support: someone who steps in to provide

institutional knowledge, connect with upper administration, or offer perspective, but never overshadows student leadership.

Second, advisors should advocate for graduate student visibility. Advisors must be vocal advocates for the presence and inclusion of graduate students within the larger institution. This means consistently raising graduate student perspectives in meetings where they are not present, especially when planning events or initiatives that typically center undergraduate populations. It includes being mindful of language—ensuring materials, emails, and public-facing messaging acknowledge graduate students as a vital part of the community. Advisors should also work to dismantle silos that isolate graduate students from broader campus resources or opportunities. Advocacy in these moments helps ensure that graduate students feel seen and valued.

Third, advisors need to build relationships through individualized support. One-on-one meetings with graduate student leaders are a cornerstone of effective advising. The authors recommend that advisors schedule regular (weekly or biweekly) check-ins with executive board members. These sessions provide space to discuss student well-being, leadership challenges, and updates on the Congress or governing body. They also allow students to reflect on their own growth and process the complexities of their roles. Treat these meetings as a time to see the student holistically—not just as a leader, but as a person navigating graduate school.

Fourth, advisors need to show up and be present with graduate student organizations. While attending events or participating in student-led initiatives is not a formal requirement of advising, it can significantly impact the strength of your relationship with students. Presence matters. When advisors show up, students feel supported beyond the office space—they feel seen in their work and efforts. Listening to their stories, engaging with their research, and being present in their environments reinforces that they matter as individuals and as contributors to the university's mission. Graduate students often express feeling undervalued on campus, despite playing critical roles as researchers, instructors, and thought leaders. Advisors can counteract this by affirming their value in daily interactions and supporting their leadership publicly and privately.

Finally, it is important for advisors to empower graduate students for leadership beyond the university. At the heart of this work is the goal of helping graduate students leave the university equipped to lead wherever they go next. Advising should be rooted in empowerment—ensuring that students feel confident, competent, and supported in their leadership. When advisors center trust, advocacy, presence, and individualized support, they help students shape not just their current experience, but their future leadership trajectories. Graduate student government becomes more than a service; it becomes a training ground for impact, legacy, and transformation.

Graduate Students

For graduate students, if you do not have a graduate student government association on your campus, the authors encourage you to push to have one established in order to have your voices heard. If you do have a graduate student government on your campus, the authors encourage you to run for office and take part in the shared governance that is occurring on your campus. Take advantage of these opportunities to work to build up your own leadership and followership. You

do not have to be an officer within student government to practice different aspects of situational leadership. The authors encourage you to practice responsible follower readiness within not just graduate student government, but also within any student organizations you join. Take an active role within the organization and if you see something that goes against the code or bylaws, speak out instead of letting it happen. It is important for graduate student leaders to work closely with all members of the organization to make sure that the organization provides a space for members to share their thoughts and ideas in a collaborative space.

The authors also encourage graduate students to take part in team building within their organizations to help with collaboration since a solid team requires trust within the members. Taking part in collaborative and team building exercises can help to build that trust within the organization. Practicing peer mentorship with one another when it comes to building leadership is another activity that you should encourage in your organizations. If you see someone in the organization who is interested in taking on a leadership role that you might hold, talk with that person and see if you can help to mentor them so that they understand your leadership role and are ready to step into the role when you leave the position. Peer mentorship can also build bonds within an organization and can allow for an easier transition of power if the person stepping into the leadership role already has an understanding of what those leadership responsibilities entail.

Conclusion

In closing, the authors hope that you take away the importance of graduate student government when it comes to leadership building, centering leadership and followership in student government, and building a sense of belonging for graduate students. The Congress of Graduate Students is an example of how with a team of leaders who have passion to create change, followers who are willing to support and enact that change, and advisors who provide guidance backed by scholarship, graduate students are able to make their voices heard by the larger student population and can create real change and impact on college campuses. It is important for all of those involved within the leadership process to remember that graduate students are a part of the heart of higher education and should be not only remembered, but should be encouraged to pursue campus leadership and involvement.

References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.
- Bloom, J. L., Hutson, B. L., & He, Y. (2008). *The appreciative advising revolution*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: Stipes.
- Congress of Graduate Students (n.d.). *Student Government Association*. <https://sga.fsu.edu/student-government/congress-graduate-students>
- Crookston, B. B. (1972). An organizational model for student development. *NASPA Journal*, 10(1), 3-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1972.11071379>
- Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H., & Johnson, D. E. (1996). *Management of organisational behaviour*. Prentice-Hall International.

- Hughes, R. L., Ginnett, R. C., & Curphy, G. J. (1998). Contingency theories of leadership. In Gill R. Hickman (Ed.), *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era* (2nd Ed., pp. 141-157). Sage Publications.
- Koo, K., Nyunt, G., Coleman, M. E., & Paralkar, U. (2023). Racial hierarchy, minority stress, and mental well-being among international students of color. In G. Nyunt, K. Koo, P. Witkowsky, & M. Andino (Eds.), *International student identities and mental well-being* (pp. 58-72). STAR Scholars.
- Kuh, G. D., & Lund, J. P. (1994). What Students Gain from Participating in Student Government. *New directions for student services*, 66, 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119946603>
- Lee, J. J. (2023). Unique challenges and opportunities for supporting mental health and promoting the well-being of international graduate students. In G. Nyunt, K. Koo, P. Witkowsky, & M. Andino (Eds.), *International student identities and mental well-being* (pp. 86-97). STAR Scholars.
- Lowenstein, M. (2005). If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach?. *NACADA Journal*, 25(2), 65-73. <https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-25.2.65>
- May, W. P. (2010). The history of student governance in higher education. *CollegeStudent Affairs Journal*, 28(2), 207-220.
- Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., & Chickering, A. W. (1989). *Improving higher education environments for adults: Responsive programs and services from entry to departure*. Jossey-Bass.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.