

# Engaging Diversity: An Inclusive Approach to Undergraduate Mentorship in Mobilization and Political Economy

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## ABSTRACT


The discipline of political science faces significant disparities in the representation and participation of underrepresented groups in graduate education, including first-generation college students, racial and ethnic minorities, and women. Underrepresentation has a wide variety of limiting effects, including a narrower range of questions being explored within the field. This article proposes a template for teaching and mentoring undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds to enhance their opportunities in graduate programs. Specifically, it examines the Mobilization and Political Economy (MPE) Summer Program, an in-residence graduate pipeline program designed to equip participants to study and conduct research on political mobilization, social movements, and political economy. The MPE Summer Program aims to develop and sustain broad-scale collaborative infrastructures that prefigure reciprocal and equitable pathways to increase participation in the social sciences across the United States.


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For more than 40 years, national data have highlighted significant educational disparities among underrepresented groups in the United States with Latinx, African Americans, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders being underrepresented in higher education (Schultz et al. 2011). Scholarship from various disciplines consistently demonstrates that students from underrepresented groups—including first-generation college students, students of color, and women—do not tend to participate in research and professional-development programs early in their college career (Schultz et al. 2011). Even when underrepresented students access higher education, they are more likely to drop out (Monforti and Michelson 2008). Common hurdles—including financial difficulties, lack of information, and inadequate institutional support and networks—contribute to these patterns. These trends in the pipeline, in turn, affect the composition of faculty bodies at US

universities—spaces that are disproportionately occupied by scholars from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Matias, Lewis, and Hope 2022; Morgan et al. 2022).

Within this context, targeted undergraduate initiatives—including graduate pipeline programs—are crucial to supporting the diversification of the scholarly community. This article examines the Mobilization and Political Economy (MPE) Summer Program, the goal of which is to address these disparities by offering undergraduate research opportunities for underrepresented groups. This eight-week, in-residence graduate pipeline is modeled after existing programs, including other National Science Foundation Research Experiences for Undergraduates (NSF-REU) Sites and the Minority Graduate Placement Program (MIGAP) (Tormos-Aponte and Vélez-Serrano 2020). The program provides training in research methods in the mobilization and political economy fields, as well as one-on-one mentoring opportunities. By highlighting key merits and challenges of the MPE Summer Program, this article points to ways that emerging undergraduate initiatives can support student learning, professional-development outcomes, and advocacy initiatives within the scholarly community. In addition to these goals, we contend that existing approaches to graduate-school preparation for underrepresented groups, as well as programs that seek to broaden participation in political science and other social science fields, would benefit from the development of collaborative infrastructures. Thus, a key aim of the MPE Summer Program is to develop and sustain broad-scale collaborative infrastructures that prefigure reciprocal and equitable pathways to increase participation in the social sciences across the United States.

Given the current political climate—one that is marked by the ascendancy of a far-right US presidential administration intent on defunding higher education and rapidly dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs nationwide—MPE-like initiatives are more critical than ever. To resist these challenges, scholars must build collaborative infrastructures across universities and move beyond reliance on federal funds to sustain programs that ensure equitable access and challenge power dynamics in higher education.

## PILLARS

The field of political science faces significant challenges regarding DEI. Data from the American Political Science Association (APSA) reveal a stark representation gap among ethnic and racial groups: Black and Latinx scholars constitute a mere 8.7% of political methodology scholars, 12.4% in comparative politics, and 11.6% in American politics (American Political Science Association 2025). These gaps highlight critical issues: minority students are less likely to participate in these higher-education spaces; find peers, faculty members, and mentors with shared experiences; and see their interests and experiences reflected in syllabi and curricula. Thus, increasing participation of political scientists from underrepresented groups will ameliorate these issues, in part, because they serve as role models to underrepresented students and inspire them to pursue academic careers across multiple disciplines (O'Donnell et al. 2015). Similarly, REUs serve as crucial spaces to address the pipeline issue within and beyond the field of political science (Mueller 2023; Russell, Hancock, and McCullough 2007). Yet, it is worth noting that whereas the NSF-REU program is among the most important funders of undergraduate research experiences in the social and behavioral sciences, political science programs are underrepresented in its

portfolio—thereby making these types of initiatives even more relevant for the discipline.

Our MPE Summer Program provides students from underrepresented groups with training in research methods as well as substantive knowledge in the fields of social movement studies, political mobilization, and political economy. This eight-week, in-residence summer program (launched in Summer 2022) also offers one-on-one mentorship opportunities and professional-development workshops. Moreover, by seeking to establish broad-scale collaborative infrastructures, the program builds and sustains connections that extend beyond solely research-oriented interactions. This is accomplished through personalized mentoring, multiple layers of support, community-building opportunities, and networking initiatives—a holistic approach that has been proven effective when mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds (Chemers et al. 2011; Ishiyama 2007).

The MPE Summer Program is distinguished from other NSF-REU programs in four ways. First, unlike similar initiatives, the program features ongoing support and multitiered mentorship—faculty members, mentors, graduate students, and peers—that extend beyond the program's eight-week duration. Second, the program uniquely integrates political economy and mobilization studies, thereby training students to address sociopolitical questions directly relevant to marginalized groups. Third, recruitment strategies target non-R1 universities and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), ensuring representation from often-overlooked communities, including undergraduate students from institutions that typically are not exposed to research opportunities. Fourth, in addition to rigorous research training, the MPE Summer Program fosters strong social ties and social capital through community-building efforts, including shared meals and social events. This creates an enduring supportive network for participants. By embodying these elements, the MPE Summer Program not only provides a holistic educational experience; it also contributes significantly to diversifying the pipeline to political science graduate programs.

## RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Our recruitment approach primarily leverages direct and long-standing relationships with colleagues and partners at institutions where undergraduate students have limited research opportunities. As a program, we work to build sustained and reciprocal relationships with colleagues, faculty members, and administrators who share our application with students who may be a good fit. Additionally, we distribute our application to minority-interested sections of scientific societies, such as APSA and the American Sociological Association.

Although our network is robust and growing, we also expanded our outreach by publicizing our program opportunities to hundreds of non-R1 and MSIs. To do this, the MPE team uses the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) MSI List developed by the NASA Office of STEM Engagement Minority University Research and Education Project.<sup>4</sup> Using this list, our program research assistants (RAs) created a database of approximately one thousand contacts by manually scraping the websites of MSIs to collect contact information for administrators who were in a position to share the MPE Summer Program application with faculty members and undergraduate students. We also leveraged platforms including Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media channels to tap into our program leaders' professional

networks. Finally, we organized virtual information sessions with the program directors and alumni.

Beyond recruitment, the MPE Summer Program application process was designed with accessibility in mind. First, to reduce the burden placed on applicants, the application features short-answer questions, rather than lengthy essays, that ask applicants to provide a brief overview of their research experience and to explain their interest in applying to the program.<sup>2</sup> Second, because research has shown that reliance on letters of recommendation in the recruitment process can perpetuate gender, cultural, and racial stereotypes as well as privilege applicants who have solicited letters from better-known recommenders, our program does not require them (Madera, Hebl, and Martin 2009; Posselt 2016). Instead, we sought supplementary information by asking applicants to provide the names and contact information of two professors. This information was an optional reference point if further clarification was needed regarding an applicant's research alignment with our program. Ultimately, this clarification was not needed because we obtained sufficient information from the responses. This inclusive and multidimensional approach proved effective, resulting in more than 60 applications received each cycle. Eight participants per cohort ultimately were selected by a diverse committee composed of faculty members from various institutions and graduate students who are part of the MPE team. More than 50% of the participants from the first two cohorts (2022 and 2023) came from MSIs.

#### BENEFITS AND PRINCIPLES OF THE PROGRAM

The MPE Summer Program offers a rare and valuable opportunity for students across various disciplines—not only political science—to engage in meaningful research in political economy and social mobilization. This program's interdisciplinary nature enables students to approach research problems from diverse perspectives, thereby enriching their ability to tackle complex issues beyond traditional political science frameworks. This approach equips students with a broad and nuanced understanding of these topics, which is essential for analyzing the multifaceted challenges within political economy and social movements.

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A key aspect that differentiates the MPE Summer Program from other pipeline programs is its unique blend of theory and

own research questions rather than work on predefined lab-based projects, thereby fostering creative thinking and intellectual independence. This structure is particularly advantageous for social science students, who rarely have access to NSF-REU programs that combine such rich theoretical insight with hands-on research and mentoring experience. Our program follows many of the best practices that previous scholars identified for addressing the unique needs of underrepresented students (Becker 2020; Shanahan et al. 2015).

#### RIGOROUS METHODS TRAINING

The MPE Summer Program is designed to provide rigorous training in research design and both qualitative and quantitative methods. We recognize the importance of quantitative methods in the social sciences and the ways that quantitative skills gaps historically have disadvantaged minority students (Perry, Zuhlke, and Tormos-Aponte 2023; Shames and Wise 2017; Smith, Gillooly, and Hardt 2022). In addition, we expose participants to qualitative methods. We teach these methods by using hands-on experiences in labs and lectures. This approach is grounded in a low student-to-instructor ratio (3:1)—supported by graduate teaching assistants—to provide more personalized attention and support. Program participants also learn to code and receive training in open-source software for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

#### MULTILAYERED MENTORSHIP

Students in the MPE Summer Program develop relationships with multiple layers of mentors who offer constructive feedback and guidance. During the recruitment and early stages of the program, we emphasize these features because previous research highlights the importance of personal support for the successful mentorship of minority students (Becker, Graham, and Zvobgo 2021; Ishiyama 2007). This multilayered mentorship strategy encompasses a diverse range of participants, including graduate students, instructors, supervising faculty members, undergraduate RAs, program-affiliated faculty members, and one-on-one interactions with guest speakers. These diverse interactions provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the nature and expectations of PhD

programs, encompassing both peer and near-peer mentorship experiences. Furthermore, as part of the final research project—which

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research methods. Unlike many NSF-REU Sites that often are lab-based, our program emphasizes theory as well as quantitative and qualitative methods. Students are encouraged to explore their

involves drafting and presenting a research proposal—students work closely with a graduate student and a faculty member who are aligned with their research area.

This program structure ensures that mentors are approachable and available. Mentors also receive a set of guidelines and best practices for mentoring program participants. As suggested by Ishiyama (2007) and Mekolichick and Gibbs (2012), we provided first-generation students with guidance beyond research, addressing pragmatic concerns such as career and graduate-school planning. We hosted professionalization lectures and workshops that offered clear guidance on graduate-program applications and highlighted available resources. This professionalization component was designed to help students complete the MPE Summer Program with a comprehensive and competitive graduate-school application package and long-lasting mentoring relationships. Post-program, the mentors, faculty members, and graduate students have supported students as they applied to graduate programs during the fall term.

The collaborative mentoring model of the MPE Summer Program provides students with a supportive and dynamic learning environment. The daily interactions facilitated by a multilevel and multidirectional mentorship structure encouraged collaboration, continuous learning, and professional development. This unique approach helps students to build confidence in conducting research while simultaneously creating a strong community of scholars who support one another's professional and intellectual growth. Together, these elements make the MPE Summer Program a unique and transformative experience for aspiring social scientists.

#### **BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG TEAM MEMBERS**

Another key principle of our program involves fostering a sense of community among the team members. We aimed to build a cohesive cohort of MPE team members and students by promoting appropriate social-emotional ties. Previous work demonstrates that mentors who work with more than one student at a time can build trusting interpersonal relationships among the team members (Behar-Horenstein, Roberts, and Dix 2010; Chermers et al. 2011; Ishiyama 2007; Mekolichick and Gibbs 2012). We took several steps to encourage these strategies. The program is residential in nature, thereby ensuring that students had guaranteed housing and access to university facilities. This arrangement permitted participants to live together and build strong emotional ties during the eight weeks of the program. Additionally, lunch was provided almost every day, and mentors and program coordinators often participated in these informal gatherings. Graduate-student mentors also worked with more than one student at a time, fostering group work and encouraging students to support one another by discussing their progress and challenges.

In addition to the participants, the members of the MPE team—co-directors and graduate and undergraduate students—worked closely together to develop new types of mentor-mentee and peer-to-peer relationships. For example, the program directors and graduate-student teaching assistants and coordinators conducted writing retreats together; this article is a result of that collaboration. These measures enhanced the learning experience for all parties and created a supportive and collaborative environment for everyone involved in the program. By living, dining, and working closely together, program participants formed a tightly knit community, which was essential for their academic and personal growth. This communal approach ensured that students felt supported both academically and emotionally.

#### **PROFESSIONALIZATION AND STUDENTS' NETWORKING**

Our program includes several tools for professional development beyond typical classroom and lab training. Students received practical guidance on various research-related skills, including reference management, citation mapping, time management, and presentation skills. We also provided valuable networking opportunities that introduced them to various experts in the fields of mobilization and political economy. Previous work highlights the importance of these networking opportunities for students' success (Mabrouk 2009; Mabrouk and Peters 2000; Shore 2024). These interactions gave students access to one-on-one meetings with leading experts and provided insight and guidance from key references in their areas of interest. Additionally, these spaces helped students to enhance their presentation skills and professional demeanor.

#### **SUBSTANTIVE FOCUS AND APPLIED RESEARCH IN MOBILIZATION AND POLITICAL ECONOMY**

Substantively, the MPE Summer Program focuses on the interrelated fields of political economy and mobilization. We address a fundamental question: What are the pathways by which people come together to challenge socioeconomic and political structures? To answer that question, our program's primary intervention concerns the intellectual advancement that stems from increased diversity in higher education. Although diversity often is referenced as the key or conduit for the revitalization of democracy, little is known about the drivers and consequences of minority mobilization outside of electoral forms of political participation. Despite its importance, minority mobilization faces numerous structural obstacles and challenges that threaten its recognition, political engagement, and impact on the overall health of global democracy. Social movement scholars identify varying political economies as important mediators of the emergence, trajectories, and political outcomes of minority mobilization. This program enables further research into the drivers and political consequences of mobilization. Equipping students in the methods and theories associated with the study of mobilization and political economy is a critical pathway for increasing representation among the academic community that engages with these topics.

#### **MATERIAL CONDITIONS**

Many students from underrepresented backgrounds face financial pressures, and the summer term often is a critical time for them to earn income that offsets or alleviates the financial burden of the academic school year. Supported by the NSF-REU program, the MPE Summer Program prioritizes this aspect by providing students with a stipend, which covers lodging and transportation, and paying for their meals. This comprehensive support allows them to focus on completing the program and reduces financial barriers to participation. By alleviating financial pressures, we hope that students can actively engage with their research projects and take full advantage of the learning opportunities provided.

#### **POST-PROGRAM ENGAGEMENT AND ALUMNI SUPPORT**

To ensure the sustainability of the relationships built during the completion of the MPE Summer Program, we implemented several strategies to maintain post-program engagement. A key component is the multilevel mentorship network that includes faculty members, graduate students (some of whom recently



became faculty members in other institutions), and program alumni. Mentors, faculty members, and graduate-student teaching assistants remain in contact with participants to provide ongoing support for graduate-school applications and career development after the formal conclusion of the program. We also encourage alumni to support one another by building a community that circulates information, shares funding opportunities, and offers peer mentorship. In turn, several MPE Summer Program alumni have supported the program, especially during the recruiting stage (e.g., speaking at our virtual information sessions).

To track the progress of our alumni, we conduct follow-up surveys to understand where participants are in their academic or professional journey. These surveys help us to maintain connections while also providing valuable data on the program's long-term impact. Furthermore, we have established a community platform to facilitate alumni engagement, thereby fostering social capital and peer networks that continue to provide mutual support. Through these initiatives, we ensure that participants have lasting resources to help them achieve their academic and professional goals. As the MPE Summer Program grows, we envision creating new spaces for contact and collaboration (e.g., meetups at conferences).

#### SUSTAINABILITY AND LESSONS

The long-term sustainability of the MPE Summer Program requires a multifaceted approach that considers financial, institutional, and collaborative resources. Success is defined not only by participants' immediate learning outcomes but also by long-term effects on their career path, public policy, and community organizing. In five to 10 years, we envision participants contributing meaningfully to academic scholarship and the advancement of knowledge in their field, equipped with the skills and networks to address pressing social, political, and economic issues. In fact, some members of the first MPE cohort have already gained admission to doctoral programs.

Whereas the NSF-REU Site MPE Summer Program demands extensive resources due to its complexity and scope, similar initiatives with comparable objectives can be developed on a smaller scale through interinstitutional collaboration. For instance, MIGAP—a pilot program in Puerto Rico led by two MPE Summer Program co-directors—supported undergraduate political science students at the University of Puerto Rico in navigating the graduate-school application process. With a modest \$10,000 grant from APSA and faculty collaboration from institutions in Puerto Rico and the

fellowships, internships, and other resources to access top US graduate schools. Both MIGAP and the Honors Program illustrate how targeted, low-budget initiatives, supported by institutional or interinstitutional collaboration, can effectively guide students through the graduate-school application process and help them to achieve their academic goals.

A common challenge for programs like ours is that the majority of funding is allocated for direct student support (i.e., participant stipends, travel, housing, and meals). This means that the costs to coordinate the program must be kept to a minimum if a proposal is to be successful and that additional funding is needed to run other aspects of the program. In this sense, the MPE Summer Program is sustained partly by in-kind contributions from the host institution, including faculty-member salaries, graduate-student assistantships, and logistical support. The program relies on a diverse team: a graduate-student teaching assistant acts as program manager, two graduate-student teaching assistants focus on quantitative and qualitative methods, and three faculty members lead instruction. Guest lectures and mentorship from other faculty members further enrich the program; however, they perform mostly unpaid work. To support their involvement, the program covers traveling expenses for faculty mentors, ensuring that their participation is feasible and accessible. These constraints have implications for the program's feasibility as well as for program leaders and coordinators. Securing support from the host institution required a multilevel advocacy strategy, including mobilizing administrators and faculty members (inside and outside of the site) as advocates. In the absence of this institutional support, the program would have relied on significant uncompensated labor that, in turn, could have led to negative professional and personal consequences as well as faculty resentment and burn-out. Running a program under these conditions would make its survival (and renewal) unlikely beyond the initial period of performance.

To be clear, our position is that colleagues at institutions with fewer resources *still* should be prioritized for funding through NSF-REU Sites programs. To enhance the sustainability of programs like ours, we advocate for targeted funding through university–foundation collaborations as well as continued emphasis on the importance of DEI in political science education. Although resource challenges are significant, leveraging a combination of institutional funding, interinstitutional collaboration, and targeted advocacy can sustain and grow programs similar to the MPE Summer Program. Collaborative approaches create recipro-

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United States, MIGAP facilitated campus visits, hosted a research-methods training camp, organized workshops on graduate-school applications and funding, and connected students with mentors. As a result, 95% of the participants were admitted to graduate programs. Similarly, the Honors Program at the University of Puerto Rico has long provided students with mentorship,

cal relationships among institutions, thereby enhancing access to high-quality education regardless of institutional resources.

#### CONCLUSION

DEI among knowledge creators is vital for advancing the social and behavioral sciences. By focusing on the MPE Summer

Program, this article provides a template for pathways to bolster undergraduate research participation among underrepresented minorities and MSIs. The model enhances demographic and methodological diversity through research experience, skills training, and mentorship. Replicating our program's template also will produce scholars in teaching and learning, thus guiding faculty members in their efforts to enhance inclusive teaching excellence and advising.

The MPE Summer Program recruits, trains, and mentors undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds to strengthen the graduate-student pipeline and foster careers in the social sciences. Our model provides a general framework for mentored research that can be adapted to various contexts, and it seeks to address more factors than only financial limitations. By combining practical and rigorous training, one-on-one interactions, and multiple layers of mentorship and by ensuring material support, we offer solid opportunities for professional and personal development to undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. The MPE Summer Program offers an alternative recruitment strategy for R1 institutions that want to reduce bias in PhD admissions, which often emphasize recommendations and institutional prestige. By adopting the MPE approach, institutions can democratize PhD access, enhance retention, and cultivate a more-inclusive academic environment.

Given the current political climate and the growing threats to DEI, initiatives similar to our program face significant challenges, as is the case with many efforts to address structural inequality. The survival of programs that challenge exclusionary structures depends on scholars' collaboration across institutions and their ability to connect with broader sectors (including philanthropic foundations) despite uncertainty and external political threats such as austerity. Such collaborations are essential to sustain inclusive efforts and create a network of support that connects programs with potential sources of funding. Moreover, universities must "meet the moment" by supporting faculty members who run these programs through the provision of financial and legal assistance. Overall, these initiatives not only contribute to increased DEI in higher education but also serve as a model of mobilization and resistance, demonstrating how universities can push back against the erosion of diversity efforts. Ultimately, the sustainability of programs like the MPE Summer Program requires continuous adaptation to the political landscape, institutional willingness to collaborate and provide support, and collective agency in resisting efforts to dismantle DEI initiatives.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

## NOTES

1. Updated annually, the NASA MSI List contains between 800 and 900 four- and two-year institutions categorized as one or more of the following: Asian American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, Predominantly Black Institution, Hispanic Serving Institution, Tribal College and Universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions Program, and Alaska Native-Serving and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions.
2. To apply, applicants were asked to answer three questions: (1) Please write a short essay (no more than 500 words) on why you want to participate in this program and pursue graduate studies; (2) Please write a short description (no more than 500 words) of the research area(s) you want to explore during your participation in this program. Note: Make sure to explain how the proposed research area/project relates to the topics of mobilization and/or political economy; and (3) Please write a short reflection (no more than 300 words) on how you plan to contribute to diversity in higher education.

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