



Graduate Students and the Building of Professional Communities

By Thomas A. Gorman and Jessica A. Homyack



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Graduate students fill an important niche in many advanced academic programs, and the field of wildlife management and conservation is no exception. Throughout their training, graduate students work diligently to develop their skills as scientists in the field and in the lab, collaborate with their colleagues to develop materials for publication, and often provide the unique insights and energy of (relative) youth. As these students move through their programs, they undertake additional roles beyond student, such as leaders in their discipline, developers of conservation programs and projects, and teachers. Across the sciences, graduate students play critical roles in educational institutions, although their value is often under-recognized and underutilized. In the wildlife profession, the role of graduate students in building the core of professional societies is even more underappreciated.

Many universities with wildlife-related degree programs have student chapters of professional societies; these chapters are often catalysts that help students learn the value of professional societies and plant the seeds of lifelong personal and professional affiliations with peers. As discussed by Eric Taylor and Bruce Lauber in the Summer 2007 issue of *The Wildlife Professional*, scholarly societies are critical mechanisms through which experts keep current with technical, scientific, and policy information and sustain their interest in professionalism and advancement in their field. Students become the energizing young professional members within these societies. They can be the forces that move the organizations forward, envisioning the changes that are necessary in the context of tradition.

The Wildlife Society (TWS) has a history of long-time members; a 2007 survey shows that over 65 percent of current TWS members have belonged to the Society for more than five years, and over 48 percent have been members for more than 10 years. Today, students—particularly graduate students, those who have made a clear commitment to the wildlife profession—can play important

roles in energizing student chapters, recruiting undergraduate students into the Society, feeding new members into professional chapters (e.g., those not affiliated with educational institutions), and driving attention and resources to the challenges and achievements of local and regional wildlife management and conservation activities.

Graduate Students and Student Chapters

TWS has more than 100 student chapters, with more forming every year; students currently make up 16 percent of the TWS membership. Similarly, students make up 26 percent of the membership in the Ecological Society of America (ESA) and at least 6 percent of the Society of Conservation Biology (SCB). Although ESA and SCB have some overlapping interests with TWS, TWS's mission is distinct, philosophically and practically focused on science-based management and conservation of wildlife. Positive experiences in TWS's student chapters can provide young professionals with concrete evidence of the benefits of being connected to a broad network of wildlife professionals throughout their careers. Some employers acknowledge the benefits of membership in professional societies and support—sometimes even require—membership and/or certification as prerequisites for career advancement.

However, student chapters can be difficult to lead and sustain. As students, we have noted great variation in the success and motivation of TWS student chapters that we have encountered. Many chapters go through phases during which a committed group of leaders faithfully plans activities, recruits members, and generally provides guidance and enthusiasm. However, when those students graduate, the chapters often wane. When new students with leadership skills and aspirations come on board, they go through a time-consuming learning curve.



Taking Advantage of Student Status

In a 2000 article in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin* (v. 28, n. 2, 468-470), then-student Mitschka Hartley attributed success of student chapters to enthusiastic and involved faculty advisors. However, from our own experience, we know that graduate students also can play a decisive role in the success of student chapters. To get an accurate reflection of the roles that graduate students play in TWS student chapters, we surveyed the faculty advisors of 90 student chapters across North America, receiving responses from 49 faculty advisors—a response rate of 54 percent.

More than 80 percent of faculty respondents indicated that graduate students were involved in their local student chapter in some way, and in 39 percent of chapters, graduate students were both officers and active members. Despite this level of activity, however, faculty also indicated that in nearly half of all student chapters, many graduate students did not frequently attend student chapter meetings. This lack of participation was true even though almost all chapters (89 percent) allowed graduate students as officers and 14 percent of these had a specific position on the executive council for a graduate student.

As both undergraduate and graduate students, we have observed direct benefits to all members of student chapters when graduate students participate. They serve as role models and leaders, contributing their growing knowledge on how to run organizations and how to focus discussions and learning opportunities on topics and issues that are important to the field. Graduate students have often started to build professional networks of students, faculty, and peer experts in other fields. Undergraduate students look to more seasoned young professionals for ideas about professionalism, networking, writing and communication skills, opportunities for research or employment, and much more. In turn, more experienced students gain confidence in their leadership and mentoring skills as they watch undergraduates transform into colleagues and friends.

Although graduate students are often involved in their local student chapter as undergraduates, we suggest that continuing their participation in student chapters as master's or doctoral students can add important dimensions to their professional development. First, as leaders of student chapters, graduate students benefit their fellow students by



Credit: Jessica Homyack

Virginia Tech undergrad students Sara Sharp (left) and Staci Hudy (right) collect data for an independent research project on territorial interactions of red-backed salamanders (*Plethodon cinereus*). The undergrads met graduate student Jessica Homyack (center), who is overseeing the project, through the Virginia Tech chapter of The Wildlife Society.

sharing their knowledge of how to acquire university funding or develop service and research projects for chapter activities. Second, graduate students who take on the role of student leaders gain opportunities to refine their mentoring and leadership skills and identify future undergraduate technicians or volunteer field assistants for their research. Of course, all leaders of student chapters receive earlier and richer opportunities to develop skills in professional communication, organizational planning, and budget management, which may lead to better jobs and stronger networks, as well as future leadership positions.

Many chapters would benefit from additional involvement from graduate students, and adding a specific leadership position to the executive council for a graduate student, such as a liaison, increases the probability of the chapter performing consistently over time. The benefits of having involved graduate students in student chapters cannot be overstated, but perhaps the greatest advantage is the feeling of community that is fostered within the academic department. ■