Networking and Tips for Grad Students of Color

Grad school is full of challenging hierarchies and systems to navigate, all while developing your scholarly and professional identity. This journey can be even more challenging for students of color encountering university politics related to race and culture, and a predominantly white higher education environment. Here are a few ideas to empower you on your path as a student and beyond.

Connect with Like-minded People and Avoid Self-isolating
Find friends, a mentor or a group who will support you no matter what. These might be people who share similar identities as you and may have personal experience with the challenges you face. Or they could be like-minded individuals who don’t share your background. Encourage each other in your goals and meet to strategize about obstacles and opportunities you face. For example, become involved in one of seven campus cultural centers or start your own grad student group. Fellow students are also great people to ask for candid advice about your faculty advisor, classes or interactions in the department.

Recognize Grad Student “Socialization” and Microaggressions
Grad students are groomed to be scholars and professionals in their fields, but that process can also involve pressure to conform to a majority culture. Recognize these nudges for what they are—an ingrained academic culture that is slow to change and promotes sameness. Many grad students of color also report encountering microaggressions and exclusion during their programs.

If you feel uncomfortable with something that is said or expected, speak up if you can, or find someone you feel comfortable telling who can advocate on your behalf. Be true to yourself and your values. The Office of Institutional Diversity coordinates the Oregon State’s Bias Response Team, which is one place where you can report concerns. Additionally, the University Ombuds Office has designated neutral or impartial conflict resolution practitioners who provide confidential and informal assistance to address issues and concerns that may arise.

Meet Scholars and Professionals of Color Via Associations
Beyond the few larger professional societies in your field, there are often identity-based associations. A few examples are the Asian American Psychological Association, the National Society of Black Engineers, the Hispanic Public Relations Association and the Network of Arab-American Professionals.

Attend conferences sponsored by organizations like these can be a smart way to find mentors and connections that could lead to a hiring opportunity or more supporters in your community.

Use Your Scholarship to Raise Topics You Care About
You may encounter people of color actively publishing in your field and leading in your departments, or you may not. But, remember that you also have a platform as a grad student to help pave the path for those who come after you. There might be opportunities to raise provocative questions to your classmates, make suggestions about change to your faculty advisor, serve on committees in your department or focus your own publishing around innovative topics that include, but are not limited to, racial or cultural topics.

Oregon State's Institutional Diversity has a great list of academic associations, local groups and many other resources at diversity.oregonstate.edu/resources.