

Episode 5: Interview with NAGPS President Sean Schrader

Brian Mitchell: Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can. Today I'm going to draw upon that network of experts to talk about the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students, or NAGPS for short. I'm delighted to have the President of NAGPS, Sean Schrader, with me today to talk about his organization and their work. Hi Sean.

Sean Schrader: Hey, Brian. Thank you very much for the opportunity. It's great to be with you.

Brian Mitchell: Let's start big picture here. How did NAGPS get started?

Sean Schrader: Well, NAGPS has a very interesting history. It started back when you had a group of graduate students who were interested in advocacy in a lot of different important areas relating to the big things that you hear about, whether it be student relief in terms of debt, relief in terms of advocacy, in areas of mental health and things of that nature, and they thought there is the unique makeup of all kinds of different graduate councils around the country. However, they thought, maybe if we band together, if we had a centralized voice that would allow us to really amplify our advocacy efforts - that's really what the idea brought about. It all kind of got started in 1987, and it's been going ever since. Of course, some of the topics in terms of advocacy have changed slightly over the years, but it's that same idea of trying to bring in different graduate students and professional students from around the country to make sure they have voice.

Brian Mitchell: So where did it get started? Who were some of the key individuals that got it off the ground?

Sean Schrader: Well, it got started with the four schools that were attending the First National Teaching Assistant Training Conference at The Ohio State University in the spring of 1986. This is where it kind of came about by these four schools that were in attendance. It was this group when they met at The Ohio State University that said "maybe we have an ability here to advocate together to get more things done." Then the group officially got founded and had its first meeting officially in March of 1987 at Washington State University. It's kind of cool. Of course, I'm not a geography expert, but you could see how you're in different locations, you're in different places, because those schools that were part of it initially really are in different parts of the country, which is indicative of the importance of the organization: having different geographical backgrounds, different specific focus areas but at the end of the day having a centralized passion for this kind of work.

Brian Mitchell: Okay. Great. How did you come to be President of NAGPS?

Sean Schrader: Well, it's actually a very funny story. I am currently wrapping up my master's degree in business administration at the University of South Florida in just a few weeks. I'm actually incredibly excited to be the Commencement speaker, and so I thought I had a little more time to get my speech ready. Then I was reminded last week that May first is just a few short weeks away which is crazy to think about. But anyway, before I did my MBA program at USF, I did my undergraduate degree in business management and in high school I was a part of the international baccalaureate program, so that allowed me to do my undergraduate degree accelerated. As a result of that, I did my undergrad in three years instead of four. I did it in business management thinking maybe there are some different opportunities to stay involved in a lot of different sectors with a broad degree like that. When I was at USF during my undergrad initially, I had no interest in advocacy or engagement, even on my campus. But after Covid, I thought there's real power and value to getting involved in being able to advocate for things you care about. So, I got involved in the student government last year. I served here in St. Petersburg, Florida, as the campus governor job, very similar to that of a student body president on the campus. When I finished that role, going into the second year of my MBA I thought maybe there are different ways I can stay involved more from a graduate student perspective and I joined and became president of USF's Graduate and Professional Student Council, trying to help organize that. Then I thought, it's important if USF is recognized at the national level and joins the national association. So, I did that, and was fortunate to join as the Director of External Affairs. Then the President called me and said, "I'm going to be leaving my job, and I think you'd be great fit to lead us forward." It's definitely been a learning experience. I haven't been in the job for that long yet. It's almost like drinking from a fire hose. But again, I'm just very fascinated by the diversity and the uniqueness and student groups that we get to represent and just getting to hear different perspectives. I'm all about making informed decisions where you actually know the perspectives. That helps to drive the decision you're making, and I think these opportunities allow me to get that full focus on that. It's been a great ride so far, and it's a lot of fun.

Brian Mitchell: That's fantastic. Tell me a little bit about the rest of your team. How did they come to these positions and how do you guys interact to perform the organization's business?

Sean Schrader: Well, it's really an interesting dynamic. You have a great team of folks who are from all parts of the country. Of course, post-Covid, any organization was hit very hard. I found that in a number of local organizations I've been a part of across the university as well as across the Tampa Bay region, little by little, when you invest, when you build up change really does happen, which is so critically important. As a result of that we have seen a shift in our makeup and our board how we operate. For the most part we do have some great folks that represent very different backgrounds: up in the northeast as well as out in California and other types of places. So, it's interesting. The board members we have, whether it be the Vice President, some of our directors of different areas like legislative affairs or outreach they represent very different sides of graduate life. Of course, being the MBA side of it is very different from getting a doctoral degree in philosophy, for example. That is the uniqueness of our board. What I really try and do as a leader more so than doing any kind of hand holding, it's about empowering members to get the most out of the experience that they can, especially our officers, who are all very talented and capable and are able to really take their passion for different opportunities and translate that into the work we're doing. It varies a little bit. One of our biggest things is legislative advocacy. That is constantly evolving. I think we'll talk about it in a minute. My previous work experience comes a lot in the legislative realm and in the federal government so I'm familiar with how one thing that starts at 9 AM may be different by the time 5 o'clock rolls around in terms of the way our government is structured. Being able to keep on top of those things and notify graduate students of different policy initiatives that are ongoing or ways they can share their voice is critical. Beyond that, really being cognizant of what is top of mind for graduate students is very important, and we try to do a lot of outreach. Two of the biggest and most significant things on the minds of graduate students today are in mental health support as well as understanding the job market and how to translate that degree to additional career success. We are able to use our board and their talents in order to further understand those opportunities and ensure that we're being one voice.

Brian Mitchell: So, the other board members, are they also graduate students or graduate professional students, or are some of them post graduation?

Sean Schrader: Most of them - I believe all of them right now, actually - are current graduate students. We have a mix of some that are in their master's degrees and more of the computer science, engineering types of fields, then more on the sports management side, as well as the doctoral side and research. So, it really runs the gambit. That's a nice thing, because as an MBA student, I wouldn't know the first thing about a doctoral degree in research, so ensuring we have all those sides represented is very important. There is something to be said for that postdoctoral element to it as well in ensuring students engaging in research or something beyond doctoral degree or master's degree can have their voice heard.

Brian Mitchell: Great! Well, sounds like you've got a good finger on the pulse of the students that you're serving. You mentioned some of the concerns of graduate students. We can come back to that in more detail in a minute, but what are some of the initiatives specifically that your organization is working on?

Sean Schrader: I used to serve as the now former district office manager for Congressman Charlie Crist when he was in Congress. Through that experience, I got a unique lens into how the legislative advocacy process works. Before working in that realm I had no idea how that process works. For millions of people, they're frustrated or angry, or want to see change happen at a federal level. From the standpoint of advocacy it can be very difficult to navigate that process and understand how all of that works. So, one of my biggest initiatives has been focused in empowering our students to understand what the legislative advocacy process looks like. How does that process go about the navigation in terms of knowing how to effectively lobby for different changes you want to see happen at a legislative level? The big thing right now: student debt and loan forgiveness. That's a major topic most people talk about.

There are other topics as well. How do you even find out who your representative is? How do you understand their role in the specific legislation? What is the role of compromise? That is something that is widely misunderstood. You can never have your cake and eat it, too. So, what is that compromise you can find between that legislator or that committee in order to have a piece of what you're looking to get done - go be implemented as opposed to all or nothing kind of mentality? That's been a big piece that we're trying to do through a lot of different mediums. One of the most effective is skill building. I'm hearing from experts in this field that work in it every day. For example, recently we hosted a very successful Town Hall that brought together members of CGS, AAU, as well as the ACE coalition of different higher education associations to get their perspective from experts who are all directors or senior level officials in the governmental affairs realm to hear success stories and how you can lobby effectively. That's very important. Another thing that's very important - we touched on this a little bit - is in empowering other graduate students in that peer-to-peer advocacy idea.

We talked about this a little bit. Covid really was a significant challenge in eroding the makeup of all kinds of organizations all over the country. Not just student groups, but all kinds of organizations. The wants and needs and behaviors of people changed quite a bit since that all took place. As a result of that, one of my main focuses has been in how do we ensure that graduate student organizations know that there is value to being established on their campus, and how can they learn from their peers in terms of successful initiatives that can be taking place? One of the most successful things you can be doing is in this idea of networking and in terms of career readiness and in terms of skill building that can translate your master's degree or your doctoral degree into real world opportunities.

That's the other big thing we've been focusing on. I'll say finally something I'm very excited to be unveiling here soon - you get the exclusive scoop - that we will be embarking on this summer is a series of listening sessions where I'm going to join different graduate student organizations around the country to hear from them directly in terms of additional concerns and opportunities. My role is only successful when we get to hear very unique and important feedback. I'm just lucky enough to be the representative. Informed decision making happens when you get to hear those very unique and different perspectives. That'll be a great value from engaging in that kind of tour.

Brian Mitchell: That's great. You mentioned the Town Hall that your organization held, and I thought it was fantastic. I was able to attend and learned a lot myself. It was very informative. I know you're going to be doing more things like that with respect to the lobbying efforts. Do you find there's a receptive audience in Congress, I mean, are the legislators - certainly their aids are probably the ones that you talk to - are they receptive to the needs of the graduate and professional student population?

Sean Schrader: It's interesting you mentioned that. I recently spoke with *US News and World Report* on the value of getting an MBA degree. I think it's relevant to the question because there is a greater divide that is happening today in the world of education in general as to whether or not an MBA or master's degree or doctoral degree has any kind of value when a lot of people think well, I could just go get certified and be a skill builder and be a plumber, electrician, welder, or get certified, and that's all that I need to do. I don't need to get a higher education - even a bachelor's degree. As a result of that, you see that brought over with some of the staff and lawmakers that you speak with. I'm a big proponent of the idea that it can coexist, right? We need both those who are thought leaders, policy makers, educators who benefit from those levels of higher education and we also need the people that are mechanics and electricians and things of that nature. When you have that big divide, it can make it sometimes very difficult to lobby effectively, because there is a misunderstanding of the need to advocate for things like having student debt relief in place or in providing additional opportunities for graduate students in the realm of career, sport, mentorship, and things of that nature. It goes back to this idea that you can engage in not only advocacy, but an education to staff in terms of making them aware of why graduate life and graduate students play a role in shaping the future. I think that's important. It goes back to that mentality how you approach it positively, and you work to build consensus as opposed to trying to get upset or angry if you're not able to achieve legislative success. That's the kind of the mindset I bring into it, and to a large extent that's what you see from a lot of other graduate students.

Brian Mitchell: You mentioned that one of the key concerns in the graduate and professional student population is mental health support. Can you expound upon that a little bit? What are the kinds of services and support that graduate-professional students specifically need?

Sean Schrader: It's a multitude of things, right? One of the biggest things is this constant feeling of being overwhelmed and anxiousness. To a lot of students, maybe when they go in to get a master's degree or a doctoral degree there's some kind of promise that's made. There's this kind of internal belief that I'm not satisfied with the jobs or with the opportunities available with my bachelor's degree so if I go ahead and get a master's degree, or if I want to expand that and get a doctoral degree, then there will be more opportunities available. We find ourselves in a very competitive job market today. So, it makes that type of opportunity more difficult to be able to tangibly quantify in the sense of saying, "well, if you go ahead and get this degree, it's guaranteed that you're going to have this type of opportunity available to you." So, for a lot of students, if you're undergoing very intense coursework, and then having to rack up debt in the process, and then really not knowing what that next stage is in terms of career progression - I think that's a big stress. That definitely creates a sense of being overwhelmed. Another thing that has happened as a result of the pandemic is with Zoom technology - which is great and how we're able to talk today and everything - but you find when people are so reliant on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or cell phones it creates this opportunity where you don't have to talk to people face to face, person to person, and for networking. That's a key skill to have. When you're always online, it creates this sense of social anxiety which can be very difficult to navigate in person-to-person contact. There's only so much that can be done in that space. On the greater whole, what I try and advocate for and focus on is peer-to-peer advocacy, being able to align graduate students who have faced these difficulties before and have been able to get support, have tips, have advice to match those students. Maybe they're facing those challenges. Being able to apply your passion, your interest in a subject area, or in a matter of policy, or in a opportunity to make a difference is so important. We've got many challenges all over the board, so I don't think any one person can solve all of them. But if you're focused on one goal that aligns with your studies, you can make big change happen little by little.

Brian Mitchell: You mentioned mental health support and the job market as key concerns from the graduate student and professional student populations. What are some other things that that you hear as you go on these listening tours?

Sean Schrader: Another big thing is understanding the role of graduate student life. What does that look like? How can that be effective? Undergrad student life is a little different, you're there for a bachelor's degree. For graduate student life, it can be a little more interesting and challenging to navigate. I'm 22 years old, almost with my MBA. That's very different from even my classmates getting their MBA who are in their thirties, forties, or fifties. That's fine. That's very interesting to me - how you see those deviations in background when everybody's still focused on the same thing. But it can make it more challenging to effectively engage people.

What I've been trying to tell students and what I plan to talk a lot about on these tours is the importance of meeting people where they are at. If you are a younger student like me, there's a lot more value to talking about things relating to job searching and to skill building in terms of writing your resume, having your LinkedIn up to date, whereas maybe if you're a mid-career professional who's looking to make that next jump there's a lot more value in being able to understand different opportunities available, taking on and building on your previous skill, leveraging those things in the new job, where you don't need to worry about LinkedIn. If you're a professor and you've recently completed a post-doctoral degree, how are you able to leverage that experience in terms of different teaching or research opportunities, maybe at the university where you've been based, or other locations where you can build upon connections. Meeting students where they're at is very, very important. We spend a lot of time scratching our heads. You think, "why don't students really get engaged?" It's because different students want to see different types of opportunities. If you have that mindset and that kind of approach for different local graduate councils or graduate student organizations that build upon the success you can have, that's something we'll also probably be hearing a lot about on the listening tour. The other big thing that we'll probably talk a lot about is this idea of diversity. As you know, in different parts of the country, it has been challenging to navigate this environment. I'm a big proponent of the idea of diversity - diverse thought. It allows for different voices to be heard. You empower different voices. I think that's critical. But in some places there's this concern that not everybody feels valued or feels heard, so being able to drive those points home, in creating those safe spaces for graduate students to be able to talk and to share their perspectives and to ensure that they know that their voice matters number one and that number two their needs are met just like anybody else is very, very important and can be done.

Brian Mitchell: We're both in states where diversity efforts have come under intense pressure. This is where national organizations like yours can be a safe space if you will, and help empower students, as you say. What are some of the ways that individuals, or even student organizations can get involved with the NAGPS?

Sean Schrader: Well, there are a few different opportunities. We're always looking for additional leadership-driven folks to join us in a number of capacities. We have a few different positions that are open right now. If you visit our website in nagps.org, and you visit our "About Us" section, you can see that type of stuff. But in addition to that, we also have different opportunities available from a standpoint of more ad hoc initiative based types of things, whether it's diversity, whether it's in advocacy, whether it's in mental health. Being able to lobby those things and manage those things effectively is critically important. We would love to have students help us lead those efforts to engage their peers. Not only understand it from policy side, but understand it from an advocacy and engagement side to ensure that we're getting people drawn in and make them aware of why focusing on these initiatives are important for the success of everybody.

Brian Mitchell: So, if you'll indulge me, I always like to hear from people how they made the decisions that they made. In your case, you're getting your MBA. How did you decide to get that advanced screen and how are you going to use it?

Sean Schrader: I think we talked about a little bit earlier when I did my undergrad and business management there's intense periods of quietness. Then everything always seems to happen at once, especially big decisions that have to be made. I remember vividly - it was the senior year of my undergrad in business management, and I wasn't sure what to do next. I'd done a few internships working for former Congressman Charlie Crist as an assistant caseworker helping folks get their stimulus payments from the IRS during the height of the Covid pandemic. I got a call from his office, explaining how his district office manager had just departed, and they were looking for somebody to fill the role and they wanted to know if I would do it. Of course, at 20 that was a little surprise but an incredible opportunity - one that I knew I could not pass up in order to make a difference and broaden my skill set in a number of ways, so I accepted. It was about that time I thought, what should I do next? I thought if I could build upon this experience now in a staff level position, managing a team of interns leading different projects really strengthening my communication and engagement skills in a number of ways, that an MBA would be relevant to me. I talked to a lot of students that have come straight from their undergraduate experience looking to go for an MBA, or looking to go for another type of master's degree, but they don't have any real work experience. In an undergrad, it's fine to have a lot of simulated discussions and assignments in which you tie in hypothetical ideas or hypothetical types of scenarios. But with a master's degree it's only really valuable when you can tie in the direct experiences - lived experiences, really - that you had with course material. That makes that much more meaningful. Then it allows you to really understand how these major concepts tie together. I thought, well given my experience in this realm now, and government with this management role, I think an MBA would be valuable to me. That was really where my focus was at. That's where I thought maybe I should pursue it. I'm happy I did, looking back on it. It's been a great experience. It's interesting.

A lot of people say, Sean, if you have government background in government experience, why would you go get MBA? Personally, I think that an MBA is so versatile in a number of arenas, depending on the type of opportunity you want to take. For me, I'm all about having different experiences. I'm not a STEM guy by day - I know I won't be going for a career in that! But regardless of the field, I think it's important to build upon skill sets - to further your own knowledge and your understanding of different ideas and concepts. All that to say that's why I went for the MBA. Moving forward, I'm very hopeful and optimistic to possibly have the opportunity to

travel abroad in the fall to Europe for a study abroad opportunity which would be very exciting. I've always spent my time in the United States, so to have the opportunity to travel abroad would be very exciting. Long term, I'm hopeful my next major aspiration is to serve as a JAG officer, either in the Air Force or the Space Force. I spent some time in the past doing some lobbying and shadowing different folks from the public defender realm, so that kind of work is very meaningful. That's the kind of work that I see myself getting into. Maybe one day down the road, some kind of work that's more in the public policy realm. With all the experiences and with an MBA, it makes those types of aspirations possible. An MBA is very easy to apply.

Brian Mitchell: That sounds really exciting, Sean. We look forward to following your career. It sounds like it's going to be very successful. Let's close out here and remind our audience if they didn't know already that April is celebrating graduate students month. What are some of the activities taking place on campuses, or what would you like to see taking place on college campuses to help celebrate our graduate and professional student populations?

Sean Schrader: Any type of celebration you can be doing, whether it's just having that recognition from campus leadership. That's a great way to start. Taking steps in your own community to get recognition from local governments is also very exciting. The idea of getting a proclamation from your local mayor or city council, or even member of Congress, is a wonderful opportunity. What's also very important and exciting to think about is the ideas that are present in hearing from graduate students. This is a phenomenal way to do it. Everybody likes free food to bring together your graduate student population to hear from them. Hear what they're enjoying, what they'd like to see moving forward. When you have parties or you have different types of leadership panels, you have different events which bring together the diverse backgrounds of our student populations. That is the most effective way to celebrate.

Brian Mitchell: That's fantastic, Sean. I want to thank you for joining me today and thank you for your insights and your expertise both personally and as President of NAGPS. I think it's going to be very, very helpful to our listening audience. So, good luck as a Commencement speaker. That's very exciting! Good luck with your commencement address and life after graduate school.

Sean Schrader: Well, thank you, Brian. I really appreciate it, and thank you for the work that you're doing in this space. It is so important to advocate for all of our students. It's opportunities like this which not only hopefully excite more students, but motivates them to get involved and really connect their own passion with opportunities to make a difference, locally or nationally.

Brian Mitchell: Thank you, Sean, and thank you for our listeners for joining me today. All of the links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at grad-post.com, that's G-R-A-D dash P-O-S-T. There, you'll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for your advanced degree. Start your 360 degree analysis today. Every degree counts.

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