

For these ASU graduate students, community starts with showing up

School of Molecular Sciences Graduate Student Council earns national recognition for programs that help students build connections beyond the lab

By David Rozul, ASU News
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No one had finished the book.

Race Schwartz, a first-year chemistry doctoral student, made it halfway.

Holly Steinhauer, a second-year biochemistry doctoral student who studies the structure of proteins associated with Lyme disease, read a summary.

Still, almost as soon as they sat down, the group of students was engaged and laughing while debating whether a future of AI-monitored dreams — the subject of Laila Lalami's dystopian novel "The Dream Hotel" — was actually farfetched.

At Readox Reaction, a monthly book club hosted by the [School of Molecular Sciences Graduate Student Council](#), the point is not to be perfectly prepared — it's to show up.

The book club is one way the group is helping students foster community by building connections beyond their laboratories. Now, their work is getting national recognition.

The School of Molecular Sciences Graduate Student Council has been named a commendable recipient of the [American Chemical Society's Student Communities Award](#) for the 2025–26 academic year.

The national recognition honors ACS-affiliated student chapters and graduate student organizations for their programs, activities and engagement. For 2025–26, the ACS Society Committee on Education recognized 125 organizations as outstanding, 168 as commendable and 116 with honorable mentions.

"When we started, no one really had any idea about the Graduate Student Council within the School of Molecular Sciences community itself," said Nirsanka Roy, council president and fourth-year biochemistry doctoral candidate. "This award shows that the work we have been doing is not

just recognized by SMS students, but that an external organization is recognizing it and giving us that credit.”

In addition to the Readox Reaction book club, which is open to graduate students across the school, the council has also organized peer-led lab safety training for teaching assistants, coordinated a student nomination drive for the SMS seminar speaker series, and held its first comprehensive exam practice talk event, giving doctoral students an opportunity to rehearse their presentations in front of fellow graduate students before presenting to their faculty committees.

Yet another such effort of the SMS Graduate Student Council is SomeBuddy for Help, a peer contact program launched to connect incoming graduate students with current students who can help answer questions that arise during their first few months at ASU.

Roy says the program can be especially helpful for international students who are not only beginning graduate school but also adjusting to life in a new country, and their group has already facilitated connections for more than 20 students.

“It can be difficult for students to make the transition to graduate school. In addition to the loneliness some feel when leaving friends and family behind to start a five-year scientific journey, expectations rise exponentially,” said [Ryan Trovitch](#), professor in the School of Molecular Sciences and associate director of graduate programs. “The council’s efforts to help students find their footing can make a significant difference. With the recent expansion of the council’s community-building work on campus, this national recognition from ACS is a clear sign of external visibility.”

Behind these rejuvenated efforts is a small team of graduate students who have taken on leadership roles on top of their research and academic responsibilities. But for Roy, the council president, rebuilding the council has always been about more than just recognition.

“The community that we want to build is one where every student is looking out for the student sitting right next to them,” he said. “We don’t want it to be, ‘I joined this PhD program, I get my degree and I get out.’ That can be extremely isolating. We want students to enjoy their research, but we also want them to enjoy their life here at ASU and SMS.”

School of Molecular Sciences Graduate Student Council leadership:

Nirsanka Roy, president

Sayantee Sen, director of student life and director of international student affairs

Vaibhav Joshi, vice president and director of professional development

Holly Steinhauer, treasurer and director of communications

Previous council members:

Idara Akpan, director of communications

Audrey Paduda, vice president

Trinity Olguin, director of professional development

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU School of Molecular Sciences students (from left) Race Schwartz, Vaibhav Joshi, Holly Steinhauer and Sayantee Sen gather on the afternoon of Friday, Sept. 25, to discuss Laila Lalami's dystopian novel "The Dream Hotel" as part of Readox Reaction, a monthly book club organized by the school's Graduate Student Council. Photo by David Rozul/ASU

Text image(s)



The School of Molecular Sciences Graduate Student Council has been named a commendable recipient of the [American Chemical Society's Student Communities Award](#) for the 2025–26 academic year. A monthly book club is one way the group is helping students foster community and build connections beyond their laboratories. Photo by David Rozul/ASU



Nirsanka Roy