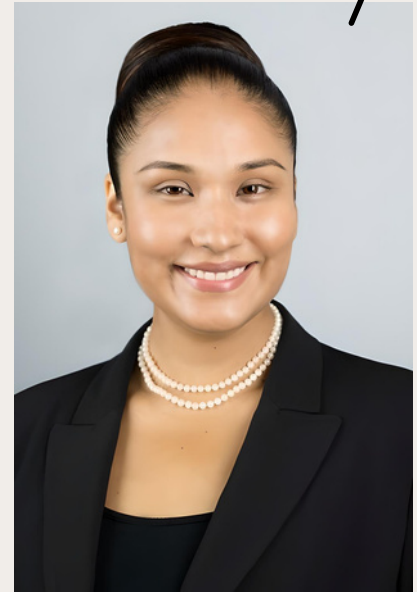


STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

NA'ILAH AMARU



Na'ilah Amaru is a political practitioner on a journey to becoming a political scientist. With a deep curiosity about the intersection of power, policy, and people, she works to transform them into forces for equity and collective progress. A U.S. Army combat veteran, she brings discipline and focus to her work—and proudly claims the title of relentless sweet tea snob. *Interview conducted by Akela Lacy and edited for clarity.*

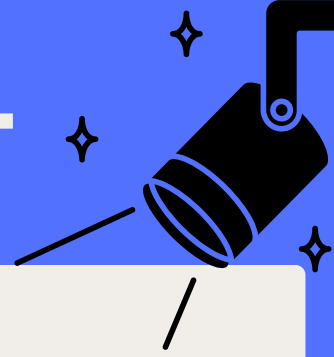


AL: Tell me a little about yourself.

NA: Over my 20+ years in politics, I've learned a crucial truth: elected officials don't pass bills or budgets—coalitions do. This realization has deeply influenced how I view political power, not just as a means of influence but as a way to bring people together, address inequities, and create systems that work for everyone. As a grassroots organizer in Atlanta, I saw political power in action as communities mobilized to fight policies and budgets that hurt working families. My time on Capitol Hill taught me that power can be about information—leveraging data to negotiate legislation and secure votes. Later, as the executive director of the New York City Council's Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus, I saw power in collaboration—uniting 26 elected officials across boroughs to set budget priorities and maintain voting blocs. Now, as a lobbyist, I use the power of relationships to center the needs of community-based organizations and push for policies that create real change. These experiences have inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. in political science to study coalitions and agenda-setting. My goal is to develop actionable frameworks that empower grassroots coalitions by strengthening their influence on policy and budget decisions. By bridging academic research with practical advocacy, I want to equip communities with tools to build more inclusive political systems.

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AL: Why did you choose CUNY?

NA: CUNY was the clear choice for me because it reflects what I value most: public scholarship that drives real-world change. The Graduate Center's focus on integrating public policy into its Political Science Ph.D. program perfectly aligns with my career goals. At this stage of my life, I wasn't just seeking a program but a space where I could combine my advocacy work with academic research to tackle pressing social issues. For these reasons, CUNY was the only school I applied to, and I'm deeply grateful to be part of this community.

AL: Would you describe your work outside of CUNY?

NA: I work as a city and state-registered lobbyist and political consultant, with a front row seat to navigating complex legislative and budget processes. In Albany, I work through intense budget sessions, balancing competing priorities to influence state funding decisions. At City Hall, I participate in all-day (and late-night) hearings and meetings to shape local policies. My various roles across the political spectrum have not only given me insights into how decisions are made but also revealed the importance of relationships and dynamics that drive political processes. Balancing the demands of this work with my doctoral studies has taught me to adapt quickly and think strategically, bridging the gap between advocacy and academic research.

AL: What did you study as an undergraduate student?

NA: I earned degrees in Political Science and Criminal Justice, along with a minor in Sociology. My studies in Political Science focused on race, ethnic, and gender politics, while my Criminal Justice degree emphasized juvenile corrections. These fields taught me how individual experiences intersect with larger structural forces, guiding me toward a career dedicated to addressing social inequities.

AL: How have your professional experiences influenced how you think about political science as a field of study?

NA: My professional journey has shown me that political science is most impactful when it bridges theory and practice to tackle real-world challenges.

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NA: For instance, leading issue campaigns, particularly those that reframed critical topics for communities of color, highlighted the importance of strategic framing and its impact on agenda-setting. I view political science not as a purely academic pursuit, but as a practical tool to challenge inequities and drive tangible change. This perspective drives my academic interests, as I aim to develop tools that empower communities to influence systems and policies effectively.

AL: How do you define success? Both in your work as a political strategist and as a scholar?

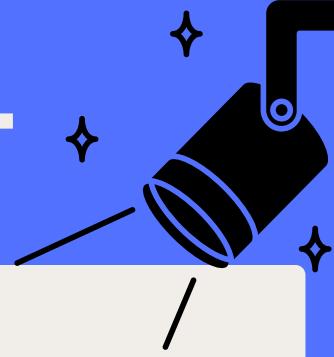
NA: Success takes on different meanings depending on the context. As a political practitioner, success can be as tangible as getting a bill out of committee for a floor vote or as nuanced as changing the narrative on an issue to shift public perception. It can also be deeply personal, such as helping someone recognize their own power to influence government decisions. As a scholar, I define success not through grades or publications but by how much I learn and how effectively I can apply that knowledge to support grassroots organizers and policymakers in creating real change. At the end of the day, success is about moving forward, no matter how big or small the progress.

AL: How has your experience at the Graduate Center influenced your perspective on the intersection of academic research and real-world political advocacy?

NA: My time at the Graduate Center has deepened my belief in the practical value of academic research. My background in political advocacy has shaped my studies, with a clear focus on how research can help amplify the political impact of grassroots coalitions. This experience has reinforced my conviction that scholarship is not just about producing knowledge but about creating tools that drive real-world change. I've been inspired by the opportunity to connect advocacy with rigorous academic analysis, and I look forward to using my research to help grassroots organizers build governing power.

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AL: What do you want to do after school?

NA: After earning my Ph.D., I aim to bridge academia and practice by teaching future grassroots organizers and policymakers strategies that transcend traditional academic frameworks. My vision is to develop courses grounded in case studies, community-driven projects, and actionable strategies shaped by my professional experiences. As a 'professor of practice,' I hope to inspire future changemakers, equipping them with the tools to build systems where equity and justice are realities, not just aspirations. Ultimately, I want to create a ripple effect that drives progress and sparks meaningful action in communities.

AL: Do you have any advice for current or future political science students?

NA: Remember that your work has the potential to change lives and transform systems - if it's connected to the realities of how power operates. Political science isn't just about studying the formal structures, processes, and institutions of power; it's also about understanding the informal spaces, relationships, and dynamics that shape decisions behind the scenes. From my own experiences, I've seen how much influence is wielded in hallway conversations, coalition meetings, and personal networks—those informal moments often determine outcomes as much as official processes. Stay curious, and don't hesitate to challenge the status quo. The path isn't clear or easy, but the courage to explore these complexities and push boundaries is what leads to real progress. Stay focused on the difference you can make, and let that guide you.