TEACHING & LEARNING

Rethinking What is Possible for Our Careers

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Founded five years ago, the APSA Committee for Applied Career Pathways[1] became a permanent membership committee in May 2026. The committee's main objectives are to identify the current status and needs of our colleagues in the field, and to create and facilitate resources that would support them in their career development across industries. As part of this work, the Committee collaborated with the APSA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession to further their overlapping goal of supporting junior scholars throughout their academic and professional development in graduate school and post-graduation. The Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession was established in 2016 with the mission to promote, support, and advocate on behalf of graduate students within political science. It achieves this mission by keeping informed of graduate student concerns and developing dynamic approaches to address them.

This article showcases a recent discussion between, Erika Arias, member of the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession and Dr. Analía Gómez Vidal, outgoing Chair of the Committee for Applied Career Pathways, on the work that the latter Committee has embarked on, the work ahead, and the shared goals between both Committees[2].

FOUNDING & BUILDING THE COMMITTEE FOR APPLIED CAREER PATHWAYS

One of the tenets of the Committee for Applied Career Pathways is that colleagues in careers outside of academia are still scholars and researchers, and more resources for career exploration are needed. Dr. Gómez Vidal underscores the importance of discussing this while questioning the framing of "alternative careers" frequently adopted, "...because we have always made emphasis on the academic careers as the default. That has changed over time. It makes sense in an environment like APSA, for example, that is primarily academic. But we also have an opportunity to really serve the broader community and do it based on our discipline, rather than the industry."

Dr. Gómez Vidal emphasized: "This is a cultural shift that needs to happen. It will require not just for graduate students to be proactive about their career development, but for everybody to coordinate and reassess how we are thinking about it. If you, as a graduate student, are thinking a 'I want to consider all the options,' but you have a Chair that tells you that anything other than academia is a failure for your career, or an advisor saying you should not look into compensation as a factor, if you are surrounded by people who may express that it is a 'waste' if you do not go into academia... all these different, very small but consistent digs will erode your confidence, and will make you feel unsafe." She added, "A lot of these dynamics are tremendously hurtful to us as a community, to graduate students and to early professionals. (...) It needs to be a bigger conversation if we want to be a discipline that really acknowledges the value of the work that we have to offer, and the diversity of the options for offering it."

This creates a series of gaps in the career development work the Committee can do, as Dr. Gómez Vidal elaborates: "(...) it was important to rethink our approach to start a bigger conversation that helps us reposition how we discuss career development, because it's not just about giving you a workshop or a resource, and then you go figure it out on your own. This is a much broader, comprehensive approach to it."

"A CULTURAL SHIFT": THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF THE COMMITTEE

In its first iteration, the Committee for Applied Career Pathways, co-chaired by Natalie Jackson and David Lazer, encountered a clear obstacle: lack of data. "We did not really have data. There are limitations to that, because the data comes from members. Most of the members have stayed in academia in some way whereas people who have not stayed in academia at all will likely not have the same incentives to remain a member." The first step the Committee took was to develop an additional module of questions in the APSA Membership Survey addressing career development support beyond academia. After the first round of results, the Committee had insights to share and build on. Dr. Gómez Vidal explains, "(...) at the annual meeting in 2024, [co-Chairs] David Lazer and I went to the Department Chair's gathering. Before we published our article [on the current landscape], we shared about it with them, along with a call to action. In 2025, we hosted a brown bag lunch with faculty and graduate advisors. I facilitated that conversation where people could bring in their questions and perspectives as faculty and career advisors."

But supporting members in adjacent professions also means recognizing the different expectations they encounter during the job search. While PhD applications traditionally focus on a CV, job talk, and teaching demonstration, many positions outside academia require alternative application materials. Erika asked Dr. Gómez Vidal about the Committee's goal to include those who are in adjacent professional jobs. The Committee has worked on several projects to assess what resonates most with

[1]Committee websites: https://apsanet.org/about/Governance/Committees/Careers-Diversity-Committee/ and https://connect.apsanet.org/graduate/.
[2] Excerpts of this discussion have been lightly edited for readability.

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members, particularly graduate students. Among them are a series of panels and webinars throughout the year that accompany the Beyond the Academic Roundtable panel the Committee hosts at the annual meeting. For example, the 2024 APSA Annual Meeting programming included a panel of scholars titled "Democracy and Elections: Practitioners Roundtable." The discussion, showcasing the work scholars do across non-academic institutions, was only a few seats short of full capacity.

A recent webinar the Committee hosted, titled "A Political Scientist's Playbook for Consulting & Business" and led by Meena Demessie, offers a concrete example of how Dr. Gómez Vidal thinks about the transferability of our skills and training. She reflected on the discussion as a panelist, "I am thinking about my business development as a business owner. But from the perspective of a political scientist, even theoretical models matter to me. There are many ways in which what we trained academically as researchers, what we go through, can translate. The better we are at generating spaces and conversations to identify those parallels, the easier it is going to be for our colleagues not to feel like that they are translating and leveraging what they have experienced and gained over time into different spaces."

CROSS-COMMITTEE COLLABORATIONS TO STRENGTHEN OUR DISCIPLINE

Another example of programming in this is the recent webinar "Pursuing Non-Academic Careers with a Political Science PhD." This webinar, co-sponsored by the two committees, had over 240 registrants.

Reinforcing the shared goals and perspectives, the Committee for Applied Career Pathways and the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession agree on a continuing collaboration. Dr. Gómez Vidal stresses that "it benefits us all when we all are at the table." These joint efforts allow the Committee for Applied Career Pathways to share the wealth of knowledge and experiences they have while offering them fresh perspectives on the needs of graduate students.

Earlier this year, the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students reflected on the APSA survey of political scientists that found 43% of respondents had reported experiencing anxiety and co-sponsored a webinar on Anxiety and Depression: Graduate School and Beyond with the APSA Committee on the Status of Disability in the Profession. Looking ahead to the next year, the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students plans to host webinars with focus on teaching for the first time, the various phases of graduate mentorship, and the use of AI. There is an interest in expanding connections between committees to provide APSA members with support through an intersectional lens.

Our shared priorities in the next phase requires coordination beyond the individual committees. This includes, for example, facilitating ways for departments to make career development more structurally embedded rather than individually driven. Through partnerships with university departments, our committees can support further work in identifying external experiences and program milestones that foster a greater level of support for our colleagues.

WHAT IS NEXT

Erika asked how the Committee plans to highlight the unseen work of those in non-academic careers and mentorship of those who are thinking of jobs outside of academia. Dr. Gómez Vidal mentioned "(...) One important aspect is understanding that different industries have different markets. If we only think about the Annual Meeting, we are anchored in the cycle of the academic market. But for anyone who is interested in jobs across the industries, the calendar is not as specific. How do we think about continuing that conversation in ways that accommodate different needs across industries?

Another element is that, thinking 'I was going pursue a more traditionally academic path, and now I'm considering different options', comes with a lot of grief, usually associated with a feeling like 'you need to start over,' too. Part of our work is to reassure our colleagues that they are not. Many of us in the discipline have expanded our professional identities beyond academia, but the skill set still maps out into different environments." This is a shared concern that was clear from the questions during our recent joint webinar. Dr. Gómez Vidal noted that "(...) there are people who have had 30-year-long careers toeing that line between academic work and beyond, with a lot of expertise in expanding what is possible for our career development without approaching it from a zero-sum perspective."

Reflecting on her own tenure with the Committee for Applied Career Pathways, Dr. Gómez Vidal articulates her hopes: "I am hopeful that this [work] continues to grow and that we are able to bring more people in, and the people who maybe have spent 10, 20 years outside of APSA or any other professional organization in political science can also come back and feel like 'I'm glad this exists.' I am excited to be part of this conversation."

DR. GÓMEZ VIDAL'S MOTIVATION AND PERSPECTIVE AS A FORMER INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

Dr. Gómez Vidal joined the Committee for Applied Career Pathways a few years after her graduation, and became co-Chair soon after. When asked about what motivated her to take on this leadership role, Dr. Gómez Vidal shared, "(...) when I was talking with one of my colleagues, also working in this space of advocacy, I would say how there really are not as many role models visible enough to really push for this conversation. I mentioned how difficult it has been as an international professional, navigating pivots and they said, 'No, there are no other role models like you out there.' It really hit me in a very fundamental way, because I have always been very proactive and vocal about all of these issues, whether I was a graduate student or even after graduating."

Drawing on her experience as an international graduate student, Dr. Gómez Vidal offers firsthand insights into the challenges and opportunities of transitioning from graduate school to the workforce. She noted, "(...) I always came in with a multi-layered perspective of this process. There is the individual experience of a grad student who is figuring out what the right path for them is and where to find the information to make an informed decision. (...) There is also the systemic element to that, including how we discuss career development so that people feel less ashamed, guilted, or scared about the repercussions of just simply asking questions about what might be right for them." This has influenced the type of work that she has done professionally since, and the programming the Committee for Applied Career Pathways has put forth. ■

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