Beyond the Ivory Tower: Political Science Careers Outside Academia

Introduction

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The pieces in this symposium all feature personal narratives from people with doctorates in political science who are not currently professors. One goal is to offer career advice to graduate students or those who are still in a position to change course in their careers. However, the pieces taken together give broad insights into a number of issues, such as how to best prepare political science doctoral students for the job market, and which skills are useful in a political science career generally. Two broad themes run through the essays—how preferences that vary across individuals relate to career satisfaction and which skills are beneficial for various careers "outside of academia."

The word "academia" has both expansive and narrow meanings. "Academia" as used in the title of the symposium refers narrowly to having a job as a professor in an institution of higher learning. But being an "academic" can also mean that someone is actively involved in the advancement of a particular field. At least some of the participants in this symposium are academics in this sense, and sometimes explicitly say so.

To make the advice in this symposium as broadly applicable as possible, a diversity of career experiences were selected. Two of us—myself and Adolf Gundersen—chose to leave our positions as professors after receiving tenure. The rest went straight from graduate school to the "real world," although several went on the job market. By happenstance, people who left academia about half way through their pre-tenure years, a fairly common phenomena, are not represented. Time spent in the "real world" after obtaining a PhD or leaving academia also varies from almost none (Clark and Klarner) to over 15 years (Gundersen and Seaver). Loose job categories for the participants are as follows—media (Benz and Drutman), consultant (Clark and Klarner), non-profit (Gundersen), think tank (Kosar), private sector (Lau/Yohai), government (Seaver) and political party (Therriault). Care was also made to pick representatives from all major subfields: political theory (Gundersen), public policy (Kosar), political psychology (Clark), and comparative/international relations (Lau/Yohai and Seaver), although students of American politics are over-represented (Benz, Drutman, Jackson, Klarner and Therriault). "Methods heavy" training is also evident (Benz, Jackson, Lau/Yohai, and Therriault). Care was taken to have an adequate representation of female authors. In some important ways, women tend to have different preferences than men when it comes to work–life considerations.[1]

Throughout the years, many articles have been written in *PS* about job placement and particular types of jobs outside of academia that are well suited for political scientists, and are too numerous to cite. The emphasis in this symposium on personal stories supplements this work. One advantage of a personal narrative is that it may be more memorable than facts and figures, or may resonate with the experience of the reader.

Many of the authors also remark that their initial salaries just coming out of graduate school were higher than they would have received as professors. This is consistent with research on the subject. American Association of University Professor data indicate that university professors—even full professors—are paid less than those in comparable jobs with PhDs in the same academic subject area who work outside of academia.[2]

Many of the articles in this symposium mention that many political science graduate programs could do more to train graduate students for non-academic jobs. Clark's piece even mentions that it is unwise to mention that you are not planning on being a professor when in graduate school, which is a widely understood perception among graduate students. Jackson refers to the contempt that some political scientists have for political science PhDs who have non-academic jobs.

It is easy to see why graduate programs in political science would be geared towards preparing graduate students to be professors—faculty benefit the most professionally if their students become academics, which contributes to their professional network, with benefits for publishing, awards, grants, etc. This suggests that the way to re-orient political science graduate programs is much like anything else—change the incentives.

That said, many academics are closely involved in "everyday politics," with therefore different incentives. But if a

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market for talent is national, it is going to have to be a small niche for faculty connections to facilitate job placement for graduate students. Campaign consulting and data driven journalism are good candidates for such markets, but other potential professions for political science PhDs may hire from too many fields for professors to have enough contacts.

eight political science PhD programs in terms of placement at a PhD granting institution obtained tenure track positions in PhD granting departments. The rest either went outside academia, or went to a non-PhD granting institution. Placement rates in other departments are often far lower. Furthermore, faculty have an incentive to encourage these unrealistic

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Academia is also changing in ways that are changing incentives. As grant funding from the government becomes harder to obtain, professors are increasingly looking to private entities to fund their endeavors. But looking away from universities and government for resources constitutes a threat to the fundamental mission of publicly funded research: to empower a small class of people to conduct research, some of which might be unpopular, for the benefit of society.[3] The sentiment that graduate programs should be more outward looking may have unanticipated negative consequences.

Another reaction to the notion that political science programs do not train their PhDs adequately enough for the "real world" is that a liberal arts education gives people the tools to educate themselves. As long as they are taught how to take in, integrate, critically evaluate, and communicate information, they can apply these capacities to many situations. There are specific skills all political science PhD programs should teach—statistics, for example—but these are being taught now.

Many symposium participants went on the job market to become academics, and some even mention that they were overconfident in their prospects. But many PhDs in political science are either not placed in a PhD granting institution, or a job outside of academia. Masuoka, Grofman, and Feld (2007) found that only 32% of the PhDs from one of the top

expectations, again to further their professional networks. This means that political science graduate students should think carefully about contingency plans beyond being a professor, if being a professor is their primary goal.

Last, most participants were careful to mention people they worked with in graduate school and how positive their experiences were—and obviously none singled out specific individuals for negative comments. But I instructed the authors to delete all references to specific individuals for brevity, so information with broad applicability would be focused on, and so none of them would be faulted for crimes of omission. ■

NOTES

1. See http://www.aaup.org/issues/women-academic-profession, accessed January 26, 2016, for resources pertaining to this topic.
2. Table C of http://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/2014-15salarysurvey, accessed October 15, 2015.
3. See Slaughter and Rhodes (2009) and related work for a discussion of these issues.

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