Desk Rejects Widen Inequalities within Academia

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Political science is a discipline that generally has decried growing inequality within society (American Political Science Association 2004). Yet, despite the recognition of these problems in greater society and the strong stances that many in our discipline have taken against them, we have been largely ignorant or dismissive of the institutions and practices that reinforce and widen inequalities within our own professional community.[1] One reason to be concerned about the increased rate of desk rejects is that the practice disproportionately harms scholars who are not employed at elite and well-financed academic institutions.[2] This practice disadvantages scholars at smaller institutions in the following two distinct ways:

1. It increases the potential for bias (either explicit or implicit) in the review process on the basis of academic affiliation and author prestige.
2. It deprives scholars with access to fewer resources and who work at smaller (and lower-ranked) academic institutions of critical feedback that is difficult for them to receive elsewhere.

Although both of these problems could be solved through other means, those alternative mechanisms are largely nonexistent.[3] Absent reforms to the editorial process and the creation of other institutions to provide feedback, the increased practice of desk rejection without review disadvantages scholars at smaller and less prestigious academic institutions. If we, as a discipline, truly care about inequality, we should discourage practices that increase inequality within our own professional community. Increasing desk rejections increases inequalities across faculty at different academic institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL PRESTIGE AND BIAS IN NON-BLIND REVIEW

Double-blind peer review is designed to eliminate bias in the review process, including bias associated with institutional prestige and reputation in the discipline. Research authored by scholars with a prestigious academic affiliation is significantly more likely to successfully navigate a single-blind review process than a double-blind review process (Okike et al. 2016; Ross et al. 2006; Sandström and Hällsten 2008; Tomkins, Zhang, and Heavlin 2017). Although authors at high-ranking academic institutions may have higher acceptance rates overall, *ceteris paribus*, the attachment of their name and institution increases the likelihood of successfully navigating the peer-review process by 10% to 15% (Ross et al. 2006).[4]

One problem with desk rejects is that the decision to reject a paper is not blind.[5] In a desk rejection, there is no input into the evaluation of the manuscript blind to the authors' reputation and institutional affiliation. Higher rates of desk rejections make the publication process more susceptible to institutional biases against scholars at low-ranking academic institutions, even if the quality and focus of their submissions are the same.[6] As such, the use of desk rejects widens inequalities between scholars at top-ranked academic institutions and those at lower-tiered academic institutions.

LACK OF CRITICAL FEEDBACK FOR SCHOLARS AT SMALL INSTITUTIONS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Desk rejections also disproportionately deprive scholars at smaller institutions of opportunities to receive feedback on their work. Critical feedback from reviewers with subfield-specific knowledge improves scholarship (de Leon and McQuillin 2020; Gross and Fleming 2012).[7] Peer review is disproportionately important for scholars at small institutions because high-quality, subfield-specific feedback is more difficult for them to find than for scholars at large, well-funded institutions. Even if editors exhibit no institutional bias in the desk-reject process, the loss of critical feedback at this stage disproportionately affects scholars at small institutions with limited resources who have inadequate access to feedback through conferences, their department, and professional networks.

To receive any comprehensive feedback, many scholars at these smaller institutions with few resources must have a paper sent out for review. Scholars at larger institutions with resources will have had multiple opportunities for feedback before their first submission at a journal where their manuscript has even a remote likelihood of acceptance. As discussed herein, this is not the case for scholars with few resources. As a result, the chances of acceptance and publication on initial submission are lower for the low-resourced scholar. Peer-reviewed rejections may be the only opportunity for those scholars to get the feedback necessary to prepare the manuscript so that it may successfully navigate the review process at another journal.

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Less Feedback from Conferences

One of the primary ways that scholars give and receive feedback about the overall value of a project, as well as specific feedback used for future revisions of their work, is at conferences (de Leon and McQuillin 2020; Gross and Fleming 2012). Conference attendance requires significant personal financial sacrifice for scholars whose salary is low and whose research budget is nonexistent.[8] Whereas scholars in well-funded positions have the resources to attend multiple conferences a year, conference attendance is more difficult for those without a research budget.[9]

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Less Feedback from the Academic Department

Whereas research universities regularly have a political science department that numbers in the teens or twenties or even (much) higher, a political science department at a small liberal arts college typically consists of only a few faculty members.[10] As a result, faculty cannot easily get feedback on a project from a departmental colleague with specific knowledge of the topic. Faculty at smaller institutions also do not typically bring in outside speakers or have regular departmental research gatherings to provide feedback for ongoing projects or to discuss recent research in the subfield.[11]

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Less Feedback from the Larger Professional Network

Inequality in access to scholarly feedback also is evident in the networks of scholars from smaller institutions with limited financial resources. Fewer connections made at conferences, fewer outside speakers, and fewer departmental colleagues all limit professional connections and stunts professional networks (Campos, de Leon, and McQuillin 2018; Gross and Fleming 2012). As such, scholars at smaller institutions are less likely be invited to present their work at other institutions or at exclusive conferences.

IMPACT OF INCREASING DESK REJECTS ON SCHOLARS AT LOWER-TIER INSTITUTIONS

Without access to many of these other sources of feedback that scholars at larger institutions have in abundance, peer review is essential to scholars at small institutions with limited financial resources. Although peer review was not explicitly instituted for the purpose of providing feedback about how to improve an article, requests for peer review acknowledge that "critical assessment of written work is an essential component of scholarly research" and that a "frank yet constructive review would benefit the author(s)" (*American Journal of Political Science* 2020). In addition, the call to "Be Reviewer 1" has highlighted the importance of providing critical yet constructive feedback as a reviewer (Leeper 2016). Blinded peer review is the only source of feedback for which a scholar's institutional affiliation (and the resources associated with that position) does not shape access to feedback.

As a result, limiting peer review through desk rejections increases inequality in academia by further widening the gap in access to feedback among faculty at different institutions. For faculty at institutions with limited resources, receiving feedback from reviewers is important for polishing a manuscript to give it the best opportunity to navigate the review process at another journal. Moreover, given the inherent institutional biases associated with single-blind review, editorial decisions to desk reject manuscripts are likely to fall disproportionately on those who most need that critical feedback. Whereas scholars at higher-ranking academic institutions may believe that desk rejects help a manuscript to find more quickly its best home, a desk rejection does exactly the opposite for scholars at low-resource institutions by preventing access to feedback that is critical for navigating the subsequent review process at another journal.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

What is fortunate is that each of these problems and the underlying problem of a shortage of reviewers that has prompted the increase in desk rejects have plausible solutions that would not increase inequalities in the discipline. Implementing these solutions could provide opportunities for feedback for those in the discipline who currently have limited access to feedback and also mitigate biases and inequalities in the discipline.

Solving Reviewer Shortages without Exacerbating Inequalities

Before addressing possible solutions, I note that Professor Gibson advances a solution to the problem of reviewer shortages that would increase inequality. In this symposium, he

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suggests charging submission fees to raise funds to pay reviewers, thereby increasing the reviewer pool. Submission fees would increase inequalities in academia.[12] Although a $100 submission fee is a pittance for faculty with a sizable research budget, it is a significant deterrent to faculty with a limited (or no) research budget.

The more logical solution is to connect submission to a journal with an enforced obligation to review for that journal. Given that each submission requires a minimum of two reviews, journals could require that each submission be followed by the submission of two reviews for that same journal—perhaps also with a premium for those whose articles are accepted.[13] Authors who do not comply with that commitment could be prohibited from submitting future manuscripts. Those who submit more would review more. Adherence to the relationship between submitting an article and reviewing for the journal would solve many of the reviewer-shortage problems.

Solving Inequality of Access to Feedback

To address the inequality of access to feedback, we must support practices that provide access to feedback independent of researcher resources or institutional prestige. Peer review is one of those practices. We should consider, however, creating and supporting additional institutions that provide access to feedback or peer review without regard to affiliation or financial resources.[14] With requirements to provide feedback on a paper in exchange for feedback on one's own work, these institutions could be self-sustaining. Moreover, we should work to create norms and institutions that enable professional networking that are not dependent on exorbitant membership and conference-registration fees and available to faculty regardless of their academic affiliation.

Solving Institutional Bias in the Review Process

Finally, if the underlying problems that necessitate the need for peer review as a way to address inequalities in access to feedback are solved and editors still feel a need to apply a heavier hand in the editorial process through the use of desk rejects for other reasons, those decisions should be triple-blind—to say nothing of ensuring double-blind peer review, which is not practiced by several prominent journals in our discipline. Under a triple-blind review system, the identity of the author is not only unknown to reviewers, it also is unknown to the editor handling the submission. Editorial teams could rely on editorial assistants to handle the interaction between the editor and the authors.[15] This system, when effectively implemented, would eliminate potential bias from either reviewers or the editor toward the author on the basis of academic affiliation—or any other author characteristic that might unduly influence manuscript evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The use of desk rejections by journal editors is concerning because it creates a greater opportunity for institutional bias and reduces the ability of scholars at small institutions with limited resources to receive feedback on their work. Desk rejections widen the well-documented inequalities in academia by cutting off access to feedback for those who need it most and by introducing more prestige bias into the research and publication process.

Instead of promoting practices that further widen inequality, we should advocate for institutions and practices that reduce inequality. We should solve the reviewer-shortage problem by tying journal submissions more closely to reviewer responsibilities, requiring more reviews of those who put a greater burden on the review system. We should create ways to provide feedback for those who otherwise might not have the resources necessary to access it. We should encourage review systems that do not risk introducing bias, whether intentional or inadvertent. Increasing rates of desk rejections accomplish none of those things. Instead, desk rejections, as currently practiced, exacerbate systemic academic inequalities. ■

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NOTES

1. In addition to desk rejects, inequality is exacerbated by hiring practices that favor graduates of elite institutions (Clauset, Arbesman, and Larremore 2015), the movement toward open-access publication that favors those with large research budgets (Vogel 2011), and the use of submission fees.
2. Although I do not have comprehensive data on their increased use, desk rejects have increased at *American Political Science Review* (from 24.6% in 2014 to 38.9% in 2019), *American Journal of Political Science* (from 20.7% in 2014 to 28.1% in 2019), and *Political Research Quarterly* (from 13.9% in 2014 to 51.2% in 2019).
3. The American Political Science Association and Midwest Political Science Association mentoring programs (www.apsanet.org/mentor and www.mpsanet.org/career/mpsa-mentoring-programs) and the virtual Junior Americanist Workshop Series (https://jawspolisci.network) are exceptions, although limited in scale.
4. While some argue that blinded review is not possible, guesses at authorship are wildly incorrect (Le Goues et al. 2018; Peters and Ceci 1982).
5. That is, unless the editorial team uses triple-blind reviews.
6. This assumes that scholars are doing the same designs. They obviously are not and, as such, these trends may be exacerbated. Higher levels of desk rejections also increase reliance on editor methodological or thematic preferences. Editorial preferences for sending out certain types of work (specifically, work that uses higher-cost research designs) for review also might be another source of bias that may make it more likely that scholars from low-resource institutions have their work desk rejected.
7. Some studies have argued that peer review has little additive value for the quality of scholarship (Fölster 1995; Hadavand, Hamermesh, and Wilson 2020). However, this work focused on the benefits of peer review for articles given an invitation to revise and resubmit rather than those that were declined.
8. It is obvious that the amount spent varies widely depending on the tolerance for long commutes and the willingness to ask friends for a place to sleep on their couch. However, attending a conference for less than $500 (i.e., my annual travel and research budget at a small resource-strapped academic institution) after registration, travel, lodging, and food is nearly impossible.
9. The startup package at my current institution was roughly 13 times what my startup budget was at a small college with limited resources six years earlier.

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Likewise, the annual funding for conference travel (not including research funds that can be used for travel) is almost tripled.

10. Moreover, each of these few faculty members often teach in separate subfields or areas to effectively provide the diverse set of course offerings necessary at the university level. As an early-career scholar at Cornell College, my department—for most of the time—consisted of two other political scientists (2.5 FTE including myself), both of whom were trained as comparativists but in different areas and with different approaches (one of whom taught both international relations and political theory). At its zenith, the faculty was 4.5 FTE (3.5 tenured and tenure-track faculty) before retirements and budgetary concerns. Although I could not have asked for kinder and more helpful colleagues, they were hard-pressed to give me feedback specific to my research.
11. While at my position at a small liberal arts college, I was able to participate in a junior faculty reading group whose core members included a historian, an art historian, a French literary scholar, a scholar with a PhD in German and feminist studies, and myself. Although we gave the best feedback we could as well-educated academics, we did not know the nuances of ongoing discussions within the disciplines of other scholars in the group.
12. Professor Gibson recommends subsidizing submission fees for those who cannot afford them by reducing their payments when they review. However, when salaries at small institutions with financial limitations lag behind other institutions, it often is difficult for scholars to forgo remuneration in exchange for an (outside) chance at publication. These scholars also have fewer chances to review.
13. *American Journal of Political Science* currently mandates that authors who submit an article for review must indicate a willingness to review a maximum of two papers. Given my own submission-to-review ratio in the past two years, however, it does not appear to hold reviewers to those expectations (and I have completed every review the journal has requested).
14. The Alexander and Diviya Magaro Peer Pre-Review Program (which is limited to affiliates of the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard) might be a model.
15. As an associate editor of the *Journal of Politics* from 2019 to 2020, Neil Malhotra implemented this practice.

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