

A Report of the Careers Diversity Committee: An Urgent Call to Long-Overdue Action

ANALIA GOMEZ VIDAL & DAVID LAZER | CURRENT & PAST CO-CHAIRS

APSA CAREERS DIVERSITY COMMITTEE

The political science discipline is failing in crucial ways to create opportunities for all members of our field, particularly those just entering it. This is an ongoing failure that will only worsen as academia enters what will be a challenging period, whose brunt will be especially felt by those seeking jobs.

We are letting our colleagues and discipline down. The fallout of this reality is existential. It is also an accelerating factor that adds to the institutional erosion of legitimacy and sustainability that academia is currently facing.

The key goals of academia are to produce high-quality work that helps us understand the world we live in, and engage, and respond to its most pressing issues from the past, present, and future; and to build the next generation of scholars that will continue to build knowledge. In doing so, our system encourages talented scholars who not only display a wide range of highly specialized skills but also showcase a strong work ethic, a commitment to learning and intellectual growth, and a resilience to conditions that are far from ideal as they navigate their training.

Yet there is a cliff at the end of their education. The political science discipline trains more people than it can employ in academia. The APSA 2024 Membership Survey found a total of 2,689 PhD graduates across 632 departments in 2023. But the total positions listed on APSA eJobs for the calendar year were only 1203, covering just 45% of graduates, far short of meeting the demand for academic placements. While eJobs is not the only platform where academic jobs are posted, and non-academic jobs are also posted on it, this is a troubling result. This is not news to most readers who have been paying attention. This is a trend many have witnessed over the years, only getting worse by a combination of factors, some of which we will get to later in this piece.

That academia is producing more graduates than academic jobs available is a known fact. The political science discipline fails to mitigate this issue in ways that some neighboring fields do. This failure profoundly impacts our students and peers' well-being. Job searching is one of the top sources of stress among respondents. Specifically, the top sources of stress among student respondents to the APSA 2024 Membership Survey were job prospects (academic or non-academic) (27%), followed by funding or financial issues (21%), mental health (14%), and family (14%).

But that is only one part of the failure we are talking about. There is a bigger one that gets at the heart of how we think about our roles as scholars and decision-makers in our profession. We are not providing a clear understanding of what is possible for those who cannot or do not want to secure a job in academia.

Our traditional approach to academic training misses the mark in providing career development tools that support graduate students in exploring and deciding what is possible (and desirable) for them. An academic career may not be the best option for many students, even those who have strong academic skills. Only 37% of student respondents suggested feeling some level of support from their departments in exploring diverse career paths, while almost 20% flagged a lack of support, and 10% felt neither supported nor unsupported. We explicitly asked students whether their departments offered resources to assist with non-academic job searches. Among respondents, only 23% said their departments had allocated resources, and 35% of respondents said their departments did not. For many who seek such tools, shame and fear are powerful deterrents and fuel a deep sense of isolation.

This failure extends even to those who remain in academia. Another top source of stress reported among responses: Job insecurity. When we break down the available jobs on APSA eJobs during 2023, 41% of them (496) were non-tenure track roles. The growing number of non-tenure-track roles, such as postdoctoral fellowships, visiting assistant professors, or adjunct lecturers, offers an alternative that keeps many colleagues in an uncomfortable equilibrium: remaining in academia long enough to eventually secure a tenure-track job. There are many reasons why colleagues might prefer non-tenure-track roles. But for those who choose them as an avenue to secure a tenure-track position, the current reality does not bode well. Some eventually secure a tenure-track role. But for many, the cycle becomes unsustainable and alienates them into a deep disillusionment with academia.

Among those who achieve their goal of securing tenure-track roles, there is a lingering feeling of uncertainty and uneasiness. It does not get much better once they secure these academic jobs. Respondents were asked whether they would choose the same job or school again, knowing what they know now. 47% of them would doubt or not make the same choice, compared to 46% who would choose the same path again. An even split that shows the rate at which our colleagues feel alienated or disillusioned with academia.

This is an existential crisis that cuts through the narratives and battles that academia faces today in multiple ways. We are losing brilliant colleagues who contribute to our field in innovative ways, alienated by the disillusionment with academia and unwilling to engage with it further, even from other industries and roles. We are also losing those who manage to stay against the odds, as they see the conditions of their employment erode

over time and start questioning whether it is worth it at all. If we cannot take care of our own in the academic field and adjacent spaces, those who already share our values and commitment to inquiry and learning, how can we make a case for the fundamental role of academia in our societies and their well-being to those who do not see the value and impact of our work?

The mandate for the APSA Careers Diversity Committee is two-fold: to identify the status quo and to find ways of addressing the issues that arise to better support our members. The committee's long-term goal is to reconfigure our discipline's career development discussion and culture to adapt to changing markets, serve our prospective and current colleagues better, and adopt an expansive worldview on the value proposition of our discipline for our society.

In 2024, we were able to better understand the current situation in two key ways: First, we received the first wave of responses to a new section in the APSA Member Survey, which informs several of the results we share in this piece. Second, we expanded the offer of our programming during the 2024 annual meeting to include two panels, one on careers outside of academia and another on democracy and elections led by a panel of applied scholars. We also had several round tables on various career paths at the career open house, including one specifically tailored to international students.

The response to the committee's programming during the 2024 annual meeting was overwhelmingly positive. Both panels¹ had full-room attendance or even standing room, quite a rarity in such a conference with multiple competing programming. Our round tables during the career open house were also well attended, gathering enough peers that having only one table became limiting at times. From our perspective, this is both good and bad news. We are glad that our programming is addressing the needs of our members and peers, and that we can provide spaces of mentorship and education for each of us to make informed decisions around our career development. It is also bad news because our efforts are not the norm.

We need to acknowledge a key reason why these efforts are not widespread and normalized: shame is a throughline for students and faculty. For students, there is fear of retaliation or lost opportunities because of perceived "lack of commitment" to academia and research. For faculty, many have not had experi-

ence outside of academia, leaving them unequipped to address questions about what possibilities are ahead.

This is our call to action: we need to engage in open and transparent public discourse that helps us understand the contributing factors to our current status and think creatively about how we can change it. We have seen other disciplines succeed in fostering an expansive worldview of what professional development looks like. Peer associations like the American Economic Association (AEA) and American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) have shown what is possible in this realm. It is time we catch up. *We want to hear from institutional leaders and department chairs.* What challenges are you facing in supporting your faculty and students' career development? We want to hear from individual colleagues across industries and career stages. What can we do to best support you and foster a welcoming environment that sees us thrive as a discipline? We can, and must, do better to support our peers at all career stages. We are here to collaborate with colleagues, decision-makers, and key stakeholders to ensure that our field serves our colleagues, whether they remain actively working in academic institutions or put their scholarship in service of pressing questions in other fields and industries.

The APSA Careers Diversity Committee² has been developing a vision and long-term work plan to reshape our dialogue on career development as a discipline so we can adapt to changing markets, serve our current and prospective colleagues better, and adopt an expansive worldview on the value proposition of our discipline for our society. We need you as an active participant and voice in this process.

This cultural shift is long overdue for our discipline. Let's work together. ■

Notes

¹The Career Diversity Committee programming for the 2024 APSA Annual Meeting included "Beyond Academia: Roundtable on Alternative Career Paths", several non-academic tables, including one for international students, as part of the APSA Career Open House, and the "Democracy and Elections: Practitioners Roundtable."

²APSA's Careers Diversity Committee was founded in 2021 (announcement). Current members of this committee are Analía Gómez Vidal (Chair), Yazmín Gracia Trejo, John Haskell, Raymond Kuo, Menna Demessie, and Adam Berinsky. Former members include Natalie Jackson (former Co-Chair), David Lazer (former Co-Chair), Ben Campbell, Sarah Binder, Andrew Holbrook, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Lee Walker.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU.

Email grad@apsanet.org with your input on the following questions:

- If you are a Department Chair or other academic leader, what challenges are you facing in supporting your faculty and students' career development?
- If you are a faculty member, what challenges are you facing in supporting your colleagues' and students' career development?
- If you are a graduate student or recent graduate, what challenges have you faced in your career development? What type of support would you want from your professional associations and academic institutions?
- What can APSA and other professional associations do to best support you in expanding career development conversations and resources?



Want to learn more about the Careers Diversity Committee?
Visit: <https://apsanet.org/about/governance/committees/careers-diversity-committee/>