

A Critical Review of the APSA Presidential Task Force on Rethinking Political Science Education

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On the same day we presented our research at the 2023 American Political Science Association meeting, we attended a roundtable discussion of findings from the 2020-2022 APSA Presidential Task Force on Rethinking Political Science Education. This task force was directed to examine multiple areas of undergraduate and graduate education in political science. Given the overlap between our research on graduate education in political science and the focus of the task force, we were extremely interested in what the final report of the APSA Presidential Task Force, 2024 would say, especially with respect to its recommendations. After reading the report, we were prompted to write this response to start a discussion about rethinking graduate education in political science.

The Executive Summary of the report indicates its reliance on “the scholarship of the last two decades” to “examine best practices and make recommendations for departments as they reconsider their own programs and curriculum” (2024, 4). The undergraduate program portion of the report referred repeatedly to the Wahlke Report (1991), which was described as the “last disciplinary statement on the undergraduate curriculum” (2024, 13). Referencing this 1991 report quite often, the discussion incorporates a variety of scholarly works focused on undergraduate education leading to recommendations in terms of curriculum content learning objectives, skill learning objectives, and value learning objectives. The undergraduate portion of the report then concludes with a list of best practices for undergraduate education in political science.

The graduate portion of the 2024 report is very different. In 2002, the APSA council approved a motion by then-president Theda Skocpol to establish a task force on graduate education in political science. A reference to the findings of this earlier task force was listed, but not discussed, in the 2024 report. Given the 2024 task force’s assertion that “scholarship on Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is much less developed at the graduate than undergraduate level” (2024, 30). It seemed odd that the findings of a previous task force on graduate education was not used as a starting point for this committee to “rethink graduate education.” Instead, the report references the findings from a 2022 APSA survey of 189 department chairs to discuss what it calls ‘areas of tension’ in PhD programs (2024, 31). Without knowing the types of departments these chairs represented (e.g. R1, R2, community colleges) or all of the questions that were asked on the survey, it is not entirely clear how or why the task

force chose the specific “areas of tensions” it focused on. That aside, the report leaves us with more questions about how the task force rethought graduate education. We will focus on three areas of the report which we found especially concerning.

With respect to doctoral student teaching training, many of the report’s findings are neither new nor surprising, as the equilibrium between research preparation and pedagogical training has long tilted towards the former (Ishiyama, Miles and Balarezo 2010, Diehl 2021). The report duly notes the dearth of mandatory pedagogical coursework for PhD students despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities are not primarily research-focused. However, the task force nearly absolves PhD-granting departments from the responsibility of ensuring that their doctoral students are receiving appropriate teaching training. The report explains that political science involves unique classroom challenges as we may cover politically polarized, sensitive topics, and professors may encourage student civic and political participation. Yet, rather than addressing the problem whereby departments may not “have experts in teaching itself or resources to offer a graduate course in pedagogy,” the task force recommends: “At a minimum, PhD students should be encouraged and ideally required to take advantage of campus-wide teaching and learning opportunities” (2024, 37). The report notes that a pedagogy course could be “required or at least strongly encouraged” (ibid). Without institutional incentives, it is unclear whether doctoral students pursue optional training as many doctoral departments already “encourage” students to pursue teaching training, with limited success (Stein 2023). Most departments do not maintain records of which students (or how many) follow said advice but when interviewees provide estimates of how many doctoral students obtain optional pedagogical training, the percentages are paltry (ibid). For external, optional training to be a sufficient source of pedagogical knowledge, institutional incentives must exist. Absent incentivization—requiring, rather than merely recommending a training course—doctoral students are unlikely to receive formalized pedagogical knowledge and preparation.

With respect to preparation at the PhD level, one of the proposals made in the report is for departments to develop “pathways” within their PhD programs, thereby creating specialized tracks for those seeking careers at R1 (research-intensive) universities and those aiming for teaching, private sector, or public sector roles. While this approach could potentially provide more tailored support and mentoring for students based on their ca-

reer goals, the report does not describe what these pathways would look like or how they would be distinguished. Moreover, given the resource gap that already exists between those seeking research, teaching or non-academic careers, it seems like this could significantly disadvantage those students who do not select the R1 pathway. R1 universities typically receive more research funding, and the allocation of resources, including mentorship and research opportunities, in PhD programs could favor students on the R1 pathway. Faculty who may perceive the R1 path as more prestigious may be less interested in working with students on the non-R1 track, resulting in less training, publishing, and networking opportunities. The authors acknowledge that “incoming graduate students may not fully understand the discipline, the career opportunities they enjoy, or their own abilities,” (2024, 11) and may not have the flexibility they need to fully explore all their options. Perhaps even more importantly, systemic barriers in academia could result in students from underrepresented groups being more likely to choose non-R1 pathways. In addition, job candidates with a PhD who are hired for private or public sector positions are frequently recruited because of their research and data skills, thereby suggesting that there is an expectation of the type of training that all political science PhD students receive regardless of their career path.

If this task force proposal is adopted, graduate programs would need to balance specialization and inclusivity, being careful to address resource gaps and ensure that all students have access to comprehensive training and career development support. Clear guidelines and best practices should be developed to prevent marginalization and discrimination of students on the non-R1 pathway.

Perhaps most concerning, the report ignores the largest component of political science graduate education. In the introduction to the section on graduate education, the report immediately states that “this report does not discuss Master of Arts or Sciences programs in Political Science” (2024, 30). Explaining that “such programs...are highly diverse and require special assessment,” the report suggests that “a full assessment of masters’ curricula and best practices remains for a future Task Force” (2024, 30). Given that the last task force report on graduate education was issued twenty years ago (Beltran et al. 2005), it does not seem likely that such an examination will take place at any time in the near future. As part of our research on MA degrees we found that “between 1949 and 2021, the aggregate number of political science master’s degrees (MA) awarded in the United States was more than the aggregate number of political science Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees awarded; specifically, 119,008 MA degrees to 36,869 PhDs” (De Maio and Macias forthcoming). With almost three times as many MA

degrees compared to PhD degrees granted, and a larger number of political science departments offering a master’s (as opposed to a doctorate) degree, a report on graduate education as it relates to master’s degrees program might actually have more resonance.

To reiterate, while we appreciate the efforts of the task force, we believe that this was a missed opportunity to publish a report that accurately reflects the state of political science education, and which contributes to an understanding of best practices. The concerns we have raised are not the sole issues we found with the report. For example, we remain concerned with the task force’s definition of political science, its silence on subfields, and its plausible exclusion of political theory as a subfield of political science graduate education. Again, we hope that focusing on these initial issues will serve as a starting point for further dialogue about the current state of political science graduate education, and how we can contribute to a flourishing field of study. ■

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This essay was originally published in the *Political Science Educator*. Please read the entire issue and past issues at <https://educate.apsanet.org/political-science-educator>