

Advice for Change: Insights from a Webinar on 'Applied Careers' in Political Science

JANET BOX-STEFFENSMEIER | THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

SHAREEN HERTEL | UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

To maintain growth and extend the benefits of graduate training more widely than just academic circles, the discipline needs to institutionalize avenues of support for people who intend to work outside of conventional academic settings, and to stress the broader applications that a political science doctorate can provide for careers in industry, nonprofits, government, and other sectors. APSA's recently formed Careers Diversity Committee seeks to address the reality of a limited supply of university positions while at the same time creating an environment for success within and beyond the professoriate.

A recent webinar on "Advising and Mentoring for Applied Careers in Political Science" (hosted May 10, 2021) moderated by Janet Box-Steffensmeier (APSA President, Ohio State University), featured a group of political scientists committed to career diversity. Together, Menna Demessie (Universal Music Group), Shareen Hertel (University of Connecticut), Natalie Jackson (Public Religion Research Institute and co-chair of the Careers Diversity Committee), and David Lazer (Northeastern University and co-chair of the Careers Diversity Committee) explored these challenges while offering a range of resources for political science faculty and graduate directors to draw upon when advising graduate students.

The panelists explored applied career options as well as their own experiences with mentoring, advising, and/or following a non-traditional career path. Each one emphasized

the need to provide opportunities to graduates that are better aligned with multiple objectives. Advisors should keep in mind career opportunities that best fit both their student's *personal* and *professional* objectives, objectives that may not necessarily align with a traditional academic career. The webinar engaged a broad audience of many directors of graduate study, students, and political science PhDs both within and outside of the academy. Success for students, and our profession, in leveraging the skills of a graduate degree in political science for better policy outcomes and to advance society critically depends on directors of graduate study to create more opportunities for their students; highlights follow, and the full event can be accessed archival-ly at: <https://www.apsanet.org/MEMBERSHIP/Departmental-Membership/Members-Only/Department-Leadership>.

INTERESTS

Students need to determine the type of lifestyle they want, while also exploring the career options that could match those priorities. Advisors, in turn, need to develop the capacity and willingness to help students align these interests and should offer a robust range of options to match those objectives. The key is to expose students to the different possibilities that are both *within* and *outside* of the academy.

Panelists in the webinar emphasized the importance of developing, engaging, and fostering connections with various associations, faculty, and alumni. Departments can do this on behalf of students, and students themselves can see the networks as a key resource in their professional development. During her advising sessions, Shareen Hertel, for example, urges students "to join sections within APSA [that match these interests] or to join other professional associations. I also make the first round of introduction for students to key colleagues at meetings, whether in person or virtually." Students can then better identify the types of settings and organization they fit into when beginning a career search.

INTELLECTUAL AND ETHICAL COMMITMENTS

Menna Demessie stressed the emergence of a "renewed appreciation for the role of the 'public intellectual'" and with it, a higher demand *outside* of the academy for people who have obtained PhDs than within it. A cultural shift is underway: people are not restricting themselves to one traditional path, but instead are finding ways to integrate their skills and interests into multiple paths that follow indirect trajectories.



Janet Box-Steffensmeier is Vernal Riffe Professor of Political Science and Professor of Sociology at The Ohio State University. She is president of the American Political Science Association. <https://polisci.osu.edu/people/box-steffensmeier.1>

Shareen Hertel is a professor of Political Science and Human Rights at the University of Connecticut, and Co-Director of the Economic & Social Rights Program of the UConn Human Rights Institute. <https://polisci.uconn.edu/person/shareen-hertel/>.

SPOTLIGHTS

Natalie Jackson's own professional experience began with an appointment at the on-campus survey center (rather than a traditional TA slot) that exposed her to a setting for using public opinion data and analysis outside of academia. But Jackson also stressed a particular tradeoff for those looking for careers both within and outside of the academy: graduate programs need to provide an environment that enables students to determine whether they want to define a focused research agenda to be pursued over the entirety of their career, or whether they would prefer to work on a range of issues collaboratively within a larger organizational agenda. Weighing this tradeoff requires students having the intellectual autonomy to identify such choices and to make informed decisions.

SKILL SETS

Once a student has defined a set of issues and mapped how those intersect with their personal intellectual and ethical commitments, departments often focus on very practical skills such as quantitative data analysis, qualitative field-based interviewing, data visualization, policy analysis, strategic communications, and/or cross-cultural literacy. Advisors and students should explore organizations where those types of capacities are integral to the work of professionals within them. Students are happiest as people and professionals if they use and deepen skills they already have while becoming open to new skills and approaches as opportunities unfold.

Hertel, for example, prefers "an integrated approach to advising [by] working with students to develop an 'academic' description of their work and a non-academic explanation of the dissertation that is legible to people beyond their narrow subfield or outside the region or methodological space they occupy in the field. Together, we work to identify not only the policy implications of a student's research, but also the possibilities for a 'professional fit.'" This fit needs to be in terms of interests, ethical and intellectual commitments, skills set(s), and types of networks open to the student as they explore career options. All panelists discussed the concrete skills necessary to search for jobs and Jackson highlighted the importance of locating applied career resources and how to write a resume. Advisors need to find ways to connect skills that fit within the academy to applications outside of it.

NETWORKS

Departments need to build opportunities for students and to take advantage of existing alumni networks across sectors. Mentors can provide opportunities to connect students with professional colleagues beyond the academy or with other organizations that can open doors, deepen connections, and help students identify professional options that fit for them. Hertel emphasizes that "former grad students who have pursued careers beyond the academy are engaged in my teaching and advising—as guest speakers, or as authors of policy briefs included in my syllabi, or as professional contacts willing to share insights with students who are exploring an applied career."

OUTCOMES

Our goal as mentors and advisors is to help students define a career that taps into their own interests, ethical and intellectual commitments, particular skills, and types of networks they want

to forge. When having these conversations, students should evaluate the type of lifestyle that they desire and determine the career and skillset that most aligns with these objectives. David Lazer argued that as a discipline, there is a "moral duty" to help students lead fulfilling lives and to build bridges to other parts of society that offer alternative options.

To meet these objectives, webinar participants flagged a variety of solutions. One was for graduate institutions to create and routinely update robust internship databases. Another was to increase engagement with alumni networks. Jackson suggested integrating discussion of multiple career pathways into the graduate orientation process itself and the first-year curriculum, while Lazer emphasized that creating an "enabling environment" for career development enriches departmental life more broadly. It is clear that each component should include advising at the level of the discipline and our associations, departments, advisors, and students in creating, developing, and taking advantage of available opportunities. Professional staff of university career centers can partner with academic faculty advisors in order to identify ways to develop and take advantage of these and other opportunities.

As a discipline, political science must create an enabling environment that institutionalizes support for students who seek to work outside of the academy. Doing so involves a shift in advising, including revisiting these issues at "critical junctures" throughout a graduate career, as Lazer noted. It involves emphasizing not only skills that are readily "transferrable," but also bringing one's "whole self" to the career discernment process, Demessie emphasized. Moving the field in this direction not only empowers students to make "life choices," Jackson argued, but also places political scientists in positions where they can impact society in a multitude of important ways.

APSA's Career Diversity Committee provides a wide range of career resources through apsanet.org, including the archived link to this webinar and other interviews with political scientists in applied careers. See our Career Paths series <https://political-scienenow.com/category/career-paths> and career resources for students, academic, and applied careers: <https://apsanet.org/Careers-for-Political-Scientists> for further details. ■



Dr. Menna Demessie is the Senior Vice President, Executive Director of the Taskforce for Meaningful Change at Universal Music Group, where she works on social justice and public policy issues in the music industry.

Natalie Jackson, PhD, is the Director of Research at PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute). She has spent the last 15 years developing extensive expertise in the survey research process as well as quantitative political science.



David Lazer is a University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Computer Sciences at Northeastern University, and Co-Director of the NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks.