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Under-Explored Opportunities: Insights into Applied (vs. Academic) Career Options in American Politics

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A great divide between “Ivory Tower” academics and those engaged in applied politics characterizes popular perceptions for those on both sides of this chasm. Yet, after spending a year in Washington, D.C., as part of the APSA’s Congressional Fellowship Program, it is evident that there are commonalities as well as differences between these two groups. However, applied career opportunities are rarely investigated by graduate students in political science, who aim instead for a tenured position in academe. According to the most recent data collected by the APSA, only 7 to 13% of Ph.D.s selected a non-academic position or career track during the period from 1990 through 2000, and this trend remained stable during the early part of this decade (Lopez 2003, 836).

This article contributes further insight on this subject by surveying a group of political science Ph.D.s who blazed trails in the area of American political institutions and behavior in Washington, D.C., in jobs outside of academe, thus straddling the perceived disconnect between the two worlds. Their insights identify interesting contexts in which political science training is being applied to current practical problems and the ways that these contexts require adaptability. They raise useful and important considerations for academics weighing a range of options at a variety of points in their careers.

Similar Skill Sets

Most of these scholars agree that their political science training provided subject matter expertise that initially gave them a strong advantage over those without similar education. This education, when combined with practical experience as CFP Fellows, provided what they believe

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was a leg up on their competition. In some cases, dissertation expertise established credibility that opened the door to opportunities. Beth Fuchs, a principal at Health Policy Alternatives, a health policy consulting firm, initially worked for the Congressional Research Service (CRS) as a social legislation specialist focusing on health care after completing her dissertation on health policy. After establishing his expertise through a well-received dissertation on congressional elections, Thomas Mann teamed up with Norm Ornstein to persuade the American Enterprise Institute to allow them to direct the Congress Project (one of many collaborations), designed to use academic scholarship to improve public understanding of Congress (Mann 2002). Stan Bach’s general expertise in American government and Congress helped him to obtain his first position at CRS. From 1972 to 2002, he continued to hone his expertise in congressional rules and procedure and became an invaluable asset as a senior specialist, assisting members of Congress and their staffs with a range of research questions, including providing them with information relevant to crafting their strategies and tactics.

In addition, these scholars indicate that graduate education cultivates agility in thinking deeply about research problems. Ph.D.s are trained to reason abstractly, to generate research questions, and to perform original data collection and analysis. The ability to analyze information and to communicate effectively in writing are common skills that applied positions require. Such training has proven useful in a variety of applied contexts. As a member of Congress first elected in 2004, Dan Lipinski found that his data analysis background helped him sift through statistical presentations from interest groups advocating different policy positions. After establishing traditional academic careers, Neil Pinney at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and Scott Keeter at the Pew Research Center utilized their specialized methodological training initially established through their graduate research interests in economic analysis

and survey research, respectively, to move into their current applied positions.

Teaching skills are other assets valued in a range of applied positions. Presentation skills are central to work at CRS, the Government Affairs Institute (GAI) at Georgetown University, and the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars, among other institutions. In these positions, political science Ph.D.s conduct seminars and short courses for a variety of audiences, including members of Congress and congressional staffers, federal bureaucrats, and undergraduate students outside of their home institutions on topics in American government and politics.

Contrasting Contexts

The faster pace, client-determined research agendas, and different target audiences in applied settings require political science Ph.D.s to adapt the skills above to the unique qualities of each environment. Responding to changing circumstances in a rapid manner characterizes the work of Ph.D.s on the Hill. George Kundanis, currently serving as a senior advisor to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) after having served in Democratic Party leadership since the 1970s, characterizes the Hill environment as one of “thinking deeply for a short period of time.” Similarly, Bill Koetzle, assistant to House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) for policy, highlights the ability to research and think systematically about complex ideas, but also emphasizes the ability to multitask, to be adaptable to changing tides and emerging events, and to think quickly on one’s feet. Further, both Hill staffers mention the primary importance of working within the party structure, creating a much different operating context than academic analysis. CRS specialists maintain objectivity but are also called upon to meet the rapid-response deadlines for requests made by Congress. Neil Pinney at GAO notes that this neutral oversight agency has more time to produce reports than CRS, and adds that most projects in applied settings require answers to narrow

questions generally defined by a congressional client. These constraints provide a direct contrast to an academic's ability to determine her own research agenda and focus on generating larger order theories over longer periods of time.

Industry constraints and non-academic audiences affect the nature of output produced in applied contexts. Due to time constraints, one-page memos are the standard output on the Hill while four-page executive summaries are the acceptable length for other applied work. At the Pew Research Center, studies target a wider audience than academic scholarship, requiring the ability to think and summarize sophisticated research in writing that can be understood by the educated lay public. Contextual differences also affect the teaching that occurs in applied settings. While work at GAI, TWC, CRS, and other educational entities involves structuring curriculum, creating lectures, and making presentations, John Haskell at GAI notes that it is a different task,

relative to university teaching, to produce and deliver a short course that is subjected to market forces and the satisfaction of professional adult audiences.

Larger Benefits and Costs

Overall, those surveyed highlight a number of advantages to serving as political scientists in applied settings in Washington, D.C. These scholars are able to learn about new topics, to address real world problems on a daily basis, and believe they have a direct impact on shaping elite opinion and policy outcomes. Several scholars mentioned the access to data and intellectual support provided in the context of their applied positions that, as one scholar noted, is greater than any university in the country. However, they observe that these benefits also come with costs. Many miss the flexible schedule and the autonomy to set their own research agenda. Some on the Hill miss the intellectual culture of the university. In

addition, some who left tenured academic positions assumed risk to stability when they gave up the job security of tenure.

Bridging the Divide

Notably, many scholars lamented the lack of ability to move freely between the two worlds. Scholars such as Ornstein and Mann have succeeded in bridging the gap, following Mann's argument that scholarship and applied work are "complementary, even synergistic, not mutually exclusive career alternatives" (Mann 2002). Reflecting this point, all scholars surveyed valued practical experience outside of the university setting, such as the CFP, designed to enhance teaching and scholarship and to provide a new perspective. Perhaps with more opportunities to experience real-world politics, academics will make further headway in bridging the gaps and strengthening the commonalities that exist between the academic and practical worlds.

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insights. Those included in this study are not intended to be an exhaustive or representative list of political science Ph.D.s working in applied settings.

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