

Is Academia Inclusive? Voices from Mid-Career

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Recent climate studies and high profile sexual harassment cases shine new light on chronic issues in higher education that impede the recruitment and retention of women and minorities in the academy. Women and people of color remain underrepresented at the ranks of full professor despite increasing their presence in graduate programs.

Discrimination, sexual harassment, chilly campus climates, workload inequality and gaps in publications, tenure, and promotion can lead to isolation, burnout, and a leaky academic career pipeline. While academic institutions may subscribe to a formal goal of increasing diversity and invest resources to that end, discrimination and climate issues can gradually drain institutions of talented faculty and graduate students.

We interviewed mid-career political scientists to better understand life in the academy, with a special interest in issues of inclusion, for the American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force on Women's Advancement in Political Science, commissioned by APSA President Kathleen Thelen. We were interested in the factors that shape career decisions at specific junctures, and how institutions and departments can improve the experiences of faculty and graduate students at all stages of the career. We conducted confidential online surveys and telephone interviews with three graduate school cohorts who entered Ph.D. programs in the early 1990s, representing private and public institutions and regional diversity. We describe our results, including 44 completed surveys and 29 completed interviews in a report published online by APSA.

Perspectives on Academia from Mid-Career

While many studies rely on quantitative indicators, we felt it was important to add the voices and lived experiences of individuals to current debates about the state of inclusion in the academy and the future of higher education. The women and men in our study entered graduate school for a variety of reasons, but all shared a love of learning. For some the inspiration to join the academy stemmed from their desire to study a topic in great detail. For others, the motivation emerged from the formative experience of their undergrad degree. And others were driven to academia by the desire to teach. All desired further knowledge.

How graduate students' hopes would align with their experiences was less clear. Our interviews reveal that the leaky pipeline began, for some, in graduate school. The women and people of color in our study were more likely than others to report a lack of encouragement and lower satisfaction with their graduate school experience. Their personal stories highlighted a need for institutions to provide formal mentoring with trained mentors and a clear process for reporting experiences with discrimination.

While some of the individuals we spoke with found their true calling outside academia and left political science voluntarily, others reported facing challenges in pursuit of their passion that eventually led them to abandon their dream of becoming a professor.

Most of those we interviewed offered concrete suggestions for how programs today could improve the experiences of all students by ensuring equal opportunities and offering more direction about the profession and job market. Some also thought programs need to provide their students with a more realistic perspective about the future, given the diminishing number of tenure-track lines. One noted that today's students need to "go into it really clear eyed, about what the field is, what, you know, an academic career is."

Our study also revealed the concrete ways that the job market and the first academic appointment can be shaped by marriage and parental obligations. Family friendly policies, where they exist formally, are often inadequate and discriminatory perceptions of their use persist. Formal leave policies are more effective than conditional, informal policies. Our subjects explained that stopping the tenure clock during a leave can be

helpful, but not if the time that a policy allows them to take off ends up counting against them, formally or informally in decisions about tenure and promotion. As one respondent noted, “The needs of kids don’t pause.” The women we interviewed were more likely to report that having children changed the way they were perceived as scholars, highlighting the consequential role of department climate. Other subjects—both women and men—noted the inadequate child care at their institutions.

Subtle, unconscious discrimination can foster a sense of isolation within a department. The line between inclusion and exclusion may be a subtle one. Faculty members may be unaware of how their behavior is impacting their colleagues. For example, discussion of gender and race is often siloed within specific courses, or even delegated to a single colleague. The cohort study revealed that more women and people of color reported that they did not feel included in the informal networks within their department. Even if unintentional, the exclusion can be felt sharply, as one of our subjects related: “I never felt like anybody was sort of out to get me, but there definitely were people who I think were indifferent to my existence at best.” One woman noted that she was extremely isolated in her department, and as a result, had to “outperform everybody else in order to just be treated the same”, which was “a big burden.”

Mentoring programs are often informal, non-existent, or lack effective training and accountability. Looking back on their experiences early in their career, one of our subjects noted “there wasn’t really anyone that I would look to as a mentor”; in contrast, another explained “there were definitely several faculty members who were very supportive ... asking me what my long-term plan was.” In our study, women and minorities often found mentors or support outside of their department, which speaks to the value of providing resources for faculty members to build relationships outside the department, outside the institution, or outside academia.

Senior women and faculty of color often hold disproportionate service burdens. As one of our respondents cautioned, “we need to provide women with resources and knowledge and experience and mentors to help them learn how to protect their time and their interests and, you know, see that as appropriate.”

Institutions invest substantial resources into each new graduate student and faculty hire, hoping they succeed and achieve their potential. The people we interviewed emphasized that supportive and inclusive environments are essential to academic success and growth, and to the fulfillment of the mission of colleges and universities, conducting cutting-edge research and educating their students. In the end, the stories shared by the individuals in our study should prompt departments and institutions to ask themselves some tough questions. Is our culture inclusive? Are workloads equitable along gender and race lines? Are criteria and expectations for tenure and promotion transparent? Are family and caregiving needs accommodated and policies available without prejudice? Moving beyond formal policies that embrace diversity, to what extent are the issues of gender and race fully incorporated in the curriculum? Are all colleagues treated with respect?

Institutional fit and personal preferences will always factor into career satisfaction. But our study suggests that all parts of the academy must do better to live up to their missions and to the diversity goals they embrace.

Suggested Area for Reflection and Policy Change

We hope that our report will lift up the voices and experiences of individuals from groups who have been systematically excluded from or marginalized in Political Science and academia more broadly. While we would not claim to have a comprehensive understanding of what is needed to fix these problems, our study of these issues did surface a number of specific changes worth consideration. The list below includes both potential policies mentioned directly by our mid-career interviewees and other suggestions we extrapolated from their stories. This is an incomplete list of areas in which department heads and institutional leaders might consider investing. Any work done, however, should integrate the input and feedback from those affected, or else the problems causing the leaky pipeline will inevitably persist.

- Clear processes for reporting all kinds of discrimination and harassment.
- Formal mentoring programs and resources to train mentors.
- Resources to support faculty attendance at conferences or workshops with opportunities to meet colleagues from other departments or institutions.
- Programing that acclimates graduate students to academia (i.e. guidance on how to get the most out of conferences and how to turn a paper into a submission for publication).

- Honest conversations about the differences between teaching and research institutions with graduate students as they prepare for the job market.
- Regular reporting and monitoring of teaching and service commitments to prevent overburdening of women and people of color as well as early career faculty.
- A system for tracking rates (by gender and race) of graduate student and early career faculty member's co-authored papers with senior faculty, which could help identify inequities.
- Family friendly policies (i.e. formal family leave policies, child care policies or resources, policies to prevent last-minute scheduling, children in-office policies).
- Processes that offer transparency in expectations for tenure and promotion.

Read more in Laura van Assendelft, Page Fortna, Claudine Gay, and Kira Sanbonmatsu "'Would I Do This All Over Again? Mid-Career Voices in Political Science,'" *APSA Preprints, American Political Science Association Committee on the Status of Women* (2019).