

Response to “Empowering Contingent Faculty”

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I read with interest the Profession Spotlight section on contingent faculty in the July 2019 issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*. Given my experiences in academia in the past 23 years, I believe the issues raised are essential given the changing nature of the job market; however, the recommendations are insufficient.

I have been a contingent faculty member since receiving my political science PhD in 1996 from Syracuse University. Unlike many in this category, my situation has turned out rather well. After several years of annual contracts, I landed a job in a highly ranked business school and am now a “clinical professor of international business.” I was among the first five clinical faculty in Penn State’s Smeal College of Business in 2004, whose ranks now number more than 30. Like political science departments, business schools across the United States are facing cost constraints and seeking flexibility. Clinical faculty members are not eligible for tenure, teach more than tenure-stream faculty, and are evaluated first and foremost on their teaching and—to a lesser extent—service. Scholarly research and publications are appreciated but not required. Renewable three-year contracts are the norm. Compensation, benefits, and resources are better than what are provided by most political science departments, although not as good as business-school tenure-stream faculty. Of course, there are downsides but, overall, I am satisfied with my contingency status, as are most of my colleagues.

Given my experience with this contingency-faculty category, I believe the recommendations made by contributors to the Profession Spotlight are not sufficient. Setting minimum working conditions (Czastkiewicz and Seefeldt 2019) would be most beneficial. Supporting efforts to unionize (Orr and Czastkiewicz 2019) may be helpful at institutions where collective bargaining is the norm but probably not at universities where tenure-stream faculty are not unionized.

Kamola (2019) proposes that faculty take control of their situation. This is good advice, but there are additional steps that individuals can take. One option is to seek faculty positions outside of political science, which is what I did. My specialization in international political economy, plus an MBA and work experience in banking prior to undertaking my doctoral studies, made me a good candidate for positions at business schools. Contingent faculty should think broadly about their skill set. Experience in information technology, for example, might be appropriate for positions in information science programs that emphasize policy.

Environmental expertise may provide opportunities in colleges that specialize in environmental studies and sustainability. Graduate work or dissertations on public administration and nongovernmental organizations may be marketable in business schools that are seeking faculty to teach organizational behavior and management of nonprofits.

Other options exist for those willing to look beyond traditional faculty positions. Academic administration positions may not include teaching and research responsibilities, but people in these roles remain connected to the intellectual vibrancy of a university setting. Even non-university settings may allow political science PhDs to be engaged in their field of expertise. I have friends who have successful and rewarding careers in the Congressional Research Service. Such a change in mindset is required not only of job candidates but also of dissertation advisers and mentors. PhD-granting departments, by their nature, are composed of tenure-stream faculty who well may expect graduate students to obtain similar positions. After all, that is how legacies are created, and there is a natural expectation that protégés will follow their mentors’ paths. However, Collins, Knotts, and Schiff (2012) found that PhD-granting departments offer less career preparation than BA or MA departments. Everyone must adapt to the new realities, including tenured faculty who never had to deal with the stresses that contingent faculty encounter and who may have little experience in the nonacademic world.

Doctoral programs must change in other ways as well. Political science departments must be honest with incoming graduate students about the realities of the academic job market. Everyone who applies to graduate school believes they are smart and hard-working. They have been successful thus far in their life, so why would getting a job after completing their PhD be so difficult? Departments should commit to listing their placement rates in the previous 10 years on their website, including the names of universities and nonacademic places where their graduates have found positions. Full disclosure and transparency will help prospective graduate students make better-informed decisions about which graduate school to attend—or none at all. Departments also should offer workshops to graduate students—starting in their first semester—that discuss the realities of the postgraduate job market. This may provide sufficient time for students to more realistically evaluate their prospects, perhaps even terminating their graduate studies with a master’s degree and beginning a different career path.

A related solution, also not mentioned in the spotlight articles, is reducing the supply of doctoral students. The American Political Science Association’s most recent placement report

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(APSA 2019) indicates that only 26.0% of job seekers in 2017–18 obtained tenure-track positions—down from 38.2% in 2010–11. Yet, according to the National Science Foundation (2019), 752 doctorates in political science were awarded in 2017—more than the 728 granted in 2010 (and the 859 as recently as 2015!). Given the changing job market and the growing percentage of political science PhDs entering contingent-faculty employment, it is incumbent on departments to reduce the intake of graduate students. Yes, this means that there will be fewer teaching and research assistants, and tenured faculty will have to accomplish more of these tasks. However, it is not ethical to admit more graduate students than can be placed in good positions after graduation. Addressing the contingent-faculty problem requires sacrifices from everyone, including tenured faculty and departments accustomed to a large stable of doctoral students.

Finally, Green (2019) examines the opportunities and challenges for foreign faculty in Japan. Whereas most political science PhDs are seeking careers in the United States, opportunities are available abroad (Saiya 2014). I have colleagues who are US citizens that have enjoyed long careers in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, and other European countries. My friends have had to sacrifice being close to family in the United States, but most have no regrets.

In summary, the proposals presented in the spotlight are a good start but are insufficient to address the problem of too many political science PhDs entering the ranks of contingent faculty. Indeed, pressure does need to be placed on universities to provide fair compensation and benefits, but PhDs must take more

responsibility to think beyond traditional tenure-track positions in their discipline and to consider opportunities abroad. Moreover, political science departments must be forthright about the career options that graduates are likely to face, be more transparent about placement and the job market, and reduce the intake of students—even if this means rankings will suffer and workloads will increase. ■

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