

# Reflecting on the Profession

## Introduction: Reflecting on the Profession

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“A complexity of messages implied in our being.”  
(Williams 1988)

This is how Patricia Williams, the legal scholar, closed her path-breaking essay, “On Being the Object of Property.” In it, she reflected on her place in law and the legal academy as an African American woman, as a law professor, and as the descendant of an enslaved woman.

Storytelling illuminates how people experience their lives in professions and how professions mark belonging. In this symposium, writers draw on their professional experiences to reflect on universities and their practices. The purpose of this symposium is to tell stories of the academic profession, reflecting on problems of structure, agency, gender, and race. Articles offer advice for both universities and faculty members. Beyond the advice, though, each piece is valuable for reflecting on experiences in universities. We invite readers to think about how they would tell their own stories.

In recent years, political science has been fostering discussion of strategies for advancing women in the academy. Data on tenure, on publication in the canonical journals, and on who advances to full professor by gender demonstrate that the profession and its pathways remain gendered (Claypool et al. 2017; Hesli, Lee, and Mitchell 2012; Teele and Thelen 2017). Experiments on differences in teaching evaluations in online classes reveal systematic gender bias by students (Mitchell and Martin 2018). Advice to women on how to succeed highlights gendered strategies (Chenoweth et al. 2016). Academics in political science have not often publicly shared stories of how strategies exclude, or of the work required for people to fit themselves into the model of success advice implies (see, however, Anonymous and Anonymous [Sally Kenney and Susan Sterett] 1999; Givens 2017).

Advice to individuals takes the profession’s practices as fixed. Using advice to figure out how to fit within institutions as they exist replicates defining individuals who do not fit as failures. Feminist scholarship on political success advancing women’s interests informs advice for collective advancement, and that could make it possible to change the institution (Mershon and Walsh 2014; 2015; 2016). Alternatively, telling

stories of how people craft their lives in the profession could lead to questioning institutions. Turning to the institution itself and the limits of what it defines as successful can borrow from queer theory. Drawing on stories, queer theory has questioned what it means to fail at being straight. Stories can critique institutions as setting the wrong standards: the metric for a life well lived is not a straight life well lived (Sjoberg 2014; Stacey and Biblarz 2001). A professional life well lived also could be too narrowly defined. Reflecting on the academy’s exclusions requires animating data with individual stories to help with rethinking meanings of success and institutional failures.

Narrow metrics that universities use influence advice about how to improve the status of women, or how to advise anyone on how to succeed. Advice takes conditions as given. For example, if women do too much service, they should say no to service. Advice to women to turn down unrewarded service work avoids the question of how that work gets done. An alternative approach would be to recognize the work. For example, the public-administration scholar Shannon Portillo argued that she does not want to follow the common advice to women to take on less service work. Instead, she argued, of finding ways to get women to cut back, some men could contribute more (Portillo 2017). Advice also assumes conditions will not change, so the rewards for different kinds of work will not change if women change strategies. Advice or analysis of tenure rates also ignores the increasing number of people who work in more contingent positions, or in administrative jobs, or who have left the profession, with varying degrees of joy or sorrow. Accomplishing change that does not only accommodate existing standards is difficult.

How to manage family life also is central to advice. Advice holds that women need to hire help for more of the care work at home and count on a partner to do a lot of it (Chenoweth et al. 2016). That advice has a version of family life that does not fit everyone. Parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews need care, not only children. Many children are raised without a second parent or partner. The advice also denies the value of a life apart from the profession.

Denying the importance of family and community life is a hallmark of a “greedy institution,” one that demands undivided loyalty (Sullivan 2013, following Coser 1974). Participants get the exclusive benefits of that voluntary loyalty. As the president of the University of Virginia, Teresa Sullivan, argued, universities have become greedy institutions (Sullivan 2013). Electronic connections step up work demands. Describing a university as an institution that asks for one’s devotion highlights the costs to ourselves, our families, and our communities implicit in some of the advice about how to succeed on the profession’s own terms.

Analyses based in patterns of outcomes—tenure denials, or promotion, or salary—may give all the information anyone needs to decide within constraints. However, people make sense of information in the context of their and others' experiences. Stories allow people to turn from the decisions they must make to the decisions organizations make. Stories also can include the whole person, not only what metrics measure.

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Telling stories about costs, successes, and strategies allows new ways of seeing a place in the world. James Pennebaker, a psychologist of language and stories, has argued that telling stories helps people to reach a resolution once they can change perspectives. He argued that being aware of ourselves and aware of others in the story gives stories a more coherent structure (Pennebaker 2011). Ways of seeing social power also inform how people tell stories. Linking stories to broader structures shows patterns beyond any one individual's control. Alternatively, stories without a context and a link beyond immediate circumstances can reinforce power (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Political scientists have written about how stories that social movements tell can promote or discourage action (Beckwith 2015). Stories that make failures contingent rather than necessary can encourage people to "fight another day" (Beckwith 2015). In summary, anyone can tell stories about professional experiences in multiple ways. Shifting perspectives could make it more possible to name problems as collective rather than individual.

Irreverent stories of the profession are becoming increasingly available via blogs, podcasts, hashtags, and social media. Gatekeeping through controlling publication does not work when Twitter handles are not subject to peer review. Fragments have gained new currency, evidenced by the #MeToo hashtag. Although neither 140 nor 280 characters allows context, reflection, and perspective shifting, that hashtag and a spreadsheet about the academy (Kelsky 2017) have promoted awareness that was not previously public. The recent turn to recognizing problems of sexual harassment and assault is welcome in raising issues long ignored and underreported. Because discrimination on the basis of sex has long been illegal and universities have long had policies against it, stories illuminate failures of law as a remedy. As recent news about legal settlements demonstrates, people often do not complain, or complaints remain unaddressed, or cases settle and settlement means institutions do not acknowledge problems as systemic (Sterett 2018).

Therefore, this symposium comprises reflections on building careers in political science. Each piece draws from experience and offers insight for both institutions and individuals. We began this project with Jennifer Diascro's own reflections on tenure denial in her blog and responses it generated. We held a workshop on advancement through stories in October 2017. The organizers' goal for the workshop was to bring together

scholars to share their experiences of the academy. Participants were diverse by gender, age, disability, sexuality, race, and ethnicity; academic rank and appointment; type and location of university; career paths in and out of the academy; and family responsibilities.

In the following pages, contributors reflect on changing conditions in the academy. Many people entered expecting

stability, recognizing that stability was not what other careers offered and included tradeoffs. Most of the essays touch on how careers were not as stable as expected. Perhaps instability is not surprising, but advice that takes conditions as fixed cannot make sense of things that do not go as promised.

If universities are greedy institutions (Sullivan 2013), they impose costs on work choices, self, and community. In response to universities' greed for initiates' loyalty, Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, Renée A. Cramer, and Taneisha Means appeal to living with integrity and abandoning the concept of balance. Stephen Bragaw writes about how his career was upended in the blink of an eye when his university closed. He reflects on his own Jungian "night sea journey," rethinking his life's purpose in the face of such dramatic change. The focus of universities and the profession on tenure does not structure later career reflections.

Like Stephen Bragaw, C. Scott Peters takes on changing demands in the university. He argues for the importance of lining up rewards, including promotion, with the work that needs to be done. Increasingly, this work includes assessment, curriculum planning, and service learning. Only some universities consider these in promotion decisions, yet the work is increasingly central to the mission in higher education.

Changing contexts also shape how Christopher H. Foreman, Jr. began his career and how it progressed. Think tanks, where he spent much of his career, once rewarded reflective books. Changing finances mean they do not anymore, and Foreman writes that such books do not always fit with what universities want anymore either. He recognizes the importance of friendships throughout his career, a lesson that does transfer to new contexts. He recognized good questions and opportunities when he saw them, leading to creative books on congressional oversight and environmental justice. Working in government inspired some of his scholarship; he watched for opportunity.

Lee Demetrius Walker tells of persistence and mentoring as he worked with a manuscript of his that journals turned down. He reflects on this story—which ends with two manuscripts published in peer-reviewed journals—in light of scholarship on sensitivity to rejection. As one reviewer of this piece noted, anyone who finds rejection devastating can quit the profession. However, sensitivity in a profession built on rejection when not everyone knows that rejection is ordinary can contribute to patterns of exclusion. Getting beyond individual perceptions could contribute to changing persistence.

The greediness of universities affects fatherhood and masculinity as well, just when many in the United States recognize that both require rethinking. Offloading care work to partners does not only implicate women's care work. Foreman, Gould, and Lovato all include their experiences of fatherhood and

Midwest Women's Caucus for Political Science 2018), and the Google sheet on which people can enter their fragments (Kelsky 2017) have named exclusion. Even without linking individual fragments to broader narrative arcs about institutions and power, reporting has made sexual misconduct

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the meaning of masculinity in the academy. As the writer Michael Ian Black (2018) argued, the world would benefit if we had more complex conversations about masculinity. These articles contribute.

Jennifer Diascro and Valeria Sinclair-Chapman interpret tenure denials. Universities often describe the tenure process in rules and handbooks and guidelines. Decision points are multiple and appeals are possible: the extensive bureaucratic process described in handbooks does not include the people who are the subject of evaluation. Diascro and Sinclair-Chapman describe experiences in the process, not the rules. Sinclair-Chapman powerfully describes what it is like to be a black woman in a historically white institution. Diascro complements Sinclair-Chapman by identifying the institutional failures in the tenure process, illustrating with her own experience. For both, the trappings of rational bureaucracy implied that there are no surprises. Yet, for Diascro and Sinclair-Chapman and many others, the outcome was surprising and devastating, not least because universities portray tenure denial as a matter of individual responsibility. Both argue that departmental and university power dynamics are central to tenure.

The stories that are not told in this symposium are myriad. People who have the least security and a great deal to say had little reason to write. People who are on term-limited contracts, or getting advice from lawyers, or very junior and on the job market did not see writing as a good idea for them. Even so, workshop participants raised questions that are pervasive in the profession and more evident in blogs and tweets than in reports. People decide about jobs within constraints not captured by a model of autonomous individuals that still inform advice. For example, people cannot always accept positions that require moving every couple of years, which the profession increasingly requires of young academics. The profession can fault individuals for not moving, but it is a level of commitment that poses a problem for families and communities. In addition, people are not always fully physically able, which feminist theory has long stated but professional literature misses. Missing that point mistakes what people bring to the job, including empathy with students' struggles and insight into fundamental political processes (Andersen 2016).

In the current moment, we note that this symposium does not include any #MeToo stories. The proliferation of fragments using that hashtag, the controversy over #MeToo and gatekeeping in political science (Bartlett and Gluckman 2018;

in the academy less isolating. The hashtag, spreadsheet, and workshop at the 2018 APSA Annual Meeting all allow questions about how the workplace is sexualized in the academy. A report from the National Academies of Sciences (2018) found that universities have done little to address sexual harassment.

So, tell your own stories. Shift perspectives. Find ways to incorporate a dominant framework and ways that do not. Learn, and learn with colleagues, and draw your own lessons about individual and collective problems.

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