

Read but Not Heard? Engaging Junior Scholars in Efforts to Make Political Science Relevant

Cheryl Boudreau, *University of California, Davis*

Political science as a discipline must overcome many obstacles to demonstrate the broader relevance of its research to the public. One major obstacle is the fact that our discipline's professional norms (including those that guide personnel decisions in academic departments) provide few rewards and often impose costs for pursuing activities that will help us to more effectively communicate our findings. These norms are particularly problematic for engaging junior scholars in efforts to make political science more relevant. Although many junior scholars are pursuing innovative research with significant real-world implications, they often lack the incentive (or have a strong disincentive) to pursue the types of outreach activities recommended by this task force. Indeed, it is not uncommon for junior scholars to believe that they should be read but not heard.

As a motivating example of the challenges we face in engaging junior scholars, consider Assistant Professor X's experience. Assistant Professor X conducted a study of a recent election that has important theoretical implications for political science as well as valuable real-world implications for political practitioners. After Assistant Professor X discusses the study's results with a senior colleague, the senior colleague invites Assistant Professor X to present those results at a seminar that other members of the department, political practitioners, and members of the media will attend. When accepting the invitation, Assistant Professor X asks whether a traditional academic talk is appropriate or whether the presentation should be geared to a policy-focused lay audience. The senior colleague replies that the type of talk is Assistant Professor X's choice. Now there is a dilemma: Assistant Professor X can give a traditional academic talk, which will impress colleagues but potentially alienate political practitioners and members of the media, or Assistant Professor X can give a more descriptive policy-focused talk, which will be of great interest to political practitioners. However, Assistant Professor X fears that colleagues may not perceive such a talk to be sufficiently rigorous or scientific. Therefore, it does not take long for Assistant Professor X to choose the traditional academic talk, which is a hit with colleagues but, predictably, is lost on other members of the audience, who leave midway through the presentation.

As this example illustrates, the goals of advancing in our profession (particularly, getting tenure) and demonstrating the public value of our research are often at odds. The conflict between these two goals is a major obstacle to engaging junior scholars in the outreach activities the task force proposes. In this article, I suggest how our discipline might reduce this conflict and more effectively engage junior scholars. I begin by arguing that engaging junior scholars is a goal worth pursuing. I next describe the challenges

that our discipline must overcome if we are to engage them effectively. I then discuss potential solutions to the weak incentives (and strong disincentives) for junior scholars to participate in outreach activities. These solutions may encourage junior scholars to communicate their findings more broadly and help our discipline make better use of a largely untapped resource in its outreach efforts.

AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE: THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING JUNIOR SCHOLARS

Before addressing the challenges we face in engaging junior scholars in outreach activities, it is important to consider whether this is a worthwhile goal. I offer several reasons for why it is important to engage junior scholars in outreach efforts. First, junior scholars are doing innovative research with important real-world implications. These scholars recently spent an extended period of time in graduate school focusing primarily on their research, simultaneously learning and using cutting-edge methodological techniques. The result is often high-quality research that introduces new data, methods, and perspectives to important political questions. Within political science, this research already has an impact. A review of recent issues of the discipline's top journals (i.e., *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics*) reveals that 67% of articles published in 2013 had at least one junior-scholar author.¹ Even more impressive, 38% of these 2013 articles were written solely by junior scholars. Unfortunately, these contributions often do not permeate beyond our discipline, despite their relevance to real-world political problems. Indeed, these articles that junior scholars wrote demonstrate that their research addresses important topics, including foreign policy, economic voting, racism, and terrorism.

Second, junior scholars are the future of our discipline. The skills and lessons they learn as graduate students, postdocs, and assistant professors are likely to influence them in the future. If communicating the results of their research to nonacademic audiences, talking to reporters, and engaging in other outreach activities are among the skills and lessons they learn, then it is likely that they will continue these activities in the future. However, if junior scholars do not learn these skills and lessons early in their career, then it is unlikely that they will do so later when additional demands (e.g., advising students and committee work) are placed on their time. Furthermore, many of the outreach activities recommended by the task force require connections with a network of political practitioners (e.g., policy analysts, reporters, and legislators). These connections take time to develop; however, once established, they provide an excellent resource for individual scholars and the discipline as a whole.

Thus, the connections that junior scholars establish have the potential to benefit our discipline for many years.

Third, junior scholars often have traits that make them especially effective advocates for the broader relevance of our discipline. Many are young, eager, and enthusiastic, which makes them good candidates for television interviews and public lectures. Junior scholars also tend to be “tech savvy” and know how to effectively use social media devices including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and podcasts. Junior scholars are also intensely focused on building a good reputation. Although they currently focus almost exclusively on their scholarly reputation, if the solutions proposed in this article are effective, they may be incentivized to expand their focus to include a good public reputation as well.

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CHALLENGES TO ENGAGING JUNIOR SCHOLARS

Despite the benefits of engaging junior scholars in efforts to make political science more broadly relevant, there are several challenges that our discipline must overcome if we are to achieve them. The main challenges that we face are the professional norms that guide tenure decisions in academic departments. These norms provide few rewards for and often impose costs on junior scholars who pursue the outreach activities recommended by the task force.

Consider first the lack of rewards for junior scholars who engage in outreach activities. Whereas all junior scholars know that they will be rewarded for publishing their research in academic journals (particularly in our discipline’s top journals), few know whether they will be rewarded for pursuing outreach activities. Although every academic department is different, the best-case scenario for many junior scholars at research universities is that outreach activities do not count against them. Thus, unless they enjoy intrinsic benefits (i.e., they find outreach activities personally gratifying), they are unlikely to engage in them.

In addition to the lack of rewards, there are potential costs for engaging in outreach activities, one of which is time. It takes time to speak to reporters, appear on television, give a public lecture, and translate academic papers for a lay audience. Given that time is a particularly scarce resource for junior scholars facing six- to eight-year tenure clocks and that there are few rewards for engaging in these activities, they have little incentive to spend time on outreach. Their time is better spent pursuing activities that will yield definite benefits and carry little risk, such as publishing in political science journals, attending academic conferences, and giving academic talks.

Other potential costs that junior scholars face are the negative perceptions from colleagues who do not see outreach activities as valuable or, worse, view them as detrimental distractions. Recall the motivating example at the beginning of this article: Assistant Professor X chose to give a traditional academic talk to a lay audience for fear that senior colleagues would not perceive the research to be sufficiently rigorous, scientific, or important otherwise. This concern that one’s research will be devalued

because it speaks to real-world policy debates seems to be common among junior scholars, although a systematic study of junior scholars’ views on this issue is needed. Anecdotally, some junior scholars are concerned that their research will not be perceived as “real” political science if it is written or presented in lay terms or if it is policy focused and practical.

Even if junior scholars could be rewarded for their outreach efforts and the costs described previously could be reduced, there is another barrier that many junior scholars face: a lack of knowledge about how to engage in outreach activities. Although junior scholars typically leave graduate school well versed in the latest methodological techniques, substantive debates in political science, and practical matters such as writing journal articles and

giving academic talks, few receive training in how to communicate their findings beyond academia. Thus, even junior scholars who are intrinsically interested in outreach activities and are willing to bear the costs may not know where or how to begin. Furthermore, even if they succeed in making connections with political practitioners and the media, they may not know the best way to communicate their findings to this audience and the public at large. Communicating with the media may also be risky for junior scholars because they may not know how to establish an understanding with journalists about how their words will be used. In contrast to senior scholars, who can cite their track record to reinforce their version of what was said in an interview, junior scholars may have little recourse if they are misquoted and suffer a loss of reputation as a result. Without knowledge about how to properly communicate their findings beyond academia, even junior scholars who are inclined to do so may choose instead to focus on academic activities for which they have actual training.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Despite the absence of benefits and the presence of costs for junior scholars who engage in outreach activities, our discipline should not be content to allow junior scholars to be read but not heard. As I argue in this article, there are important benefits to be gained by including junior scholars in outreach efforts. By adopting policies that reward junior scholars for their outreach efforts and/or help them to meet the associated costs, our discipline might make better use of this largely untapped resource in its efforts to make political science more broadly relevant.

Our discipline’s governing body—the American Political Science Association (APSA)—could reward junior scholars for their outreach efforts with awards, grants, and other forms of recognition. For example, APSA could establish a program that encourages organized sections to give awards and grants to junior scholars who demonstrate excellence in outreach activities. Some APSA sections already recognize junior scholars with awards and provide grants to fund their research or travel. Organized sections could also establish awards for junior scholars who excel in communicating their findings beyond academia and grants for those

who propose to conduct research that has significant implications for real-world politics. One way that APSA might incentivize organized sections to create such awards and grants is by offering to match the funds that are devoted to this purpose.

In addition to rewarding junior scholars for their efforts, APSA could take steps toward changing the negative perceptions of outreach activities that exist in many academic departments. Although APSA cannot control tenure decisions in academic departments and universities, it can send a signal about the importance of outreach and try to begin to change the way that it is perceived. To this end, APSA might develop and publicize performance metrics that show the value and impact of engaging in outreach activities. Currently, academic citation counts are a commonly used metric that academic departments and university administrators use to judge whether scholars' books and articles are influential. APSA could help expand the definition of "influential" by developing metrics that quantify the real-world impact of scholars' research—for example, citation counts for blog entries, editorials, and other nonacademic articles based on their research. It might also develop a way to count the number of times that interviews with junior scholars and other videos about their research are downloaded or viewed. By creating and publicizing measures of real-world impacts, APSA will enable tenure-letter writers, academic departments, and university administrators to evaluate junior scholars' performance on this dimension more easily. If tenure-letter writers, departments, and universities care about and use these measures, this would begin to change the way that outreach is perceived. It would also reward junior scholars who conduct research that is relevant to real-world politics and who broadly communicate their findings, as well as provide an incentive to those who do not.

APSA can also help junior scholars meet the costs associated with outreach activities. As discussed previously, time is one of the main barriers for junior scholars who want to engage in outreach. To minimize this cost, APSA could provide opportunities for outreach at its annual meeting, thereby making participation more efficient for junior scholars. The many junior scholars who regularly attend APSA's annual meeting would save considerable time by engaging in outreach at that event. Moreover, APSA could sponsor special panels and roundtables that address timely

APSA could build on this effort by including more junior scholars on the panels, thereby providing yet another low-cost (and potentially high-reward) opportunity to communicate their findings more broadly. Indeed, this opportunity would not only be efficient for junior scholars, but it would also recognize those who are effective at promoting the broader relevance of political science.

Another way that APSA can help junior scholars meet the costs associated with outreach activities is to educate them about the potential benefits of such activities for their research. Junior scholars may perceive these activities to be costly; however, they may overlook the fact that the costs can be offset by direct benefits to their research. For example, those who study local politics may learn about the cities they study if they take time to speak with public officials or political practitioners in those localities. Similarly, junior scholars who study political campaigns may gain important insight about how real-world campaigns work by communicating with the practitioners who actually run them. As more junior scholars who engage in these types of activities become tenured,² they will provide a valuable knowledge base for others who seek to further their research through interactions with political practitioners.

Furthermore, these interactions with practitioners may produce opportunities for research partnerships. Recent research is replete with examples of such partnerships that include junior scholars. Bolsen, Ferraro, and Miranda (2014) partnered with the Cobb County Water System to randomly assign three different water-conservation messages to Georgia households. Butler and Kousser (forthcoming) worked with the Council of State Governments to study whether and when state legislators cooperate with one another. Hyde (2010) worked with The Carter Center to randomize the assignment of election observers to polling places in Indonesia. In my own research, I partnered with the League of Women Voters and a local newspaper to distribute surveys to candidates running for local offices and to develop a voter guide, the effects of which I then studied using exit polls and online surveys (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2014, 2015). These and similar research partnerships yield individual benefits for junior scholars and collective benefits for our discipline.

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topics that appeal to political practitioners and the media. These panels and roundtables could be advertised in advance, with invitations sent to practitioners who might be especially interested in the topic. After the presentation portion of the panel or roundtable, there could be a formal question-and-answer period, followed by time for political practitioners and reporters to follow up with scholars whose presentations or comments they found especially relevant. In the spring of 2014, the Midwest Political Science Association's annual meeting included similar panels, although only one of the featured speakers was a junior scholar.

To facilitate the formation of research partnerships, APSA might create programs that bring junior scholars and potential research partners together. The association already sponsors the APSA Congressional Fellows Program, in which junior scholars who study legislative politics have an opportunity to spend a year working on Capitol Hill. The goal of this program is for scholars and political practitioners to work together and learn from one another. Given its success, APSA could create similar fellowships for junior scholars working in other substantive fields.³ For example, the APSA Congressional Fellows Program

could be expanded to include opportunities for those studying state and local politics to work in a state or local legislature for a year. Similarly, junior scholars studying political behavior would benefit from a program that matches them with a nonpartisan polling organization such as Gallup. Junior scholars interested in international relations could benefit from a program in which they spend a year at the World Bank or another international institution. If APSA secured funding for programs like these, it would facilitate valuable research partnerships between junior scholars and political practitioners.

APSA might also create a staff position (e.g., a director of outreach) dedicated to disseminating information about potential outreach activities and their research benefits, as well as teaching junior scholars how to engage in outreach effectively. The director of outreach would be responsible for learning about outreach opportunities and strategies for taking advantage of them. The director could then communicate this information to junior scholars by organizing and leading “how-to” sessions at APSA’s annual meeting. The director could also widely distribute this information in an APSA newsletter. The “how-to” sessions and newsletters would also overcome another cost that many junior scholars face: that is, a lack of knowledge about how to engage in outreach and where to begin.

A WAY FORWARD: SURVEY EXPERIMENTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF OUTREACH

In this article, I argue that our discipline will benefit from engaging junior scholars in its outreach efforts but also that there are several challenges in doing so. I propose solutions that might overcome these challenges and engage junior scholars more effectively. The solutions address the lack of benefits and/or the costs that junior scholars face when engaging in outreach; however, note that the discussion of these issues is based only on anecdotal evidence of both junior and senior scholars’ perceptions. A productive way forward is to systematically gather evidence of junior scholars’ perceptions of the benefits and costs of outreach activities, as well as senior scholars’ perceptions of whether these activities are beneficial or detrimental for junior scholars. The evidence will help produce solutions that address both junior and senior scholars’ actual concerns about participation in outreach.

To gather this evidence, I propose a survey of APSA members with an experiment embedded in it. For the survey, it would be valuable to ask questions about how much and what types of outreach junior and senior scholars are currently engaged in (e.g., “How often do you give interviews to reporters who write about politics?”). We currently have little knowledge about who actually does outreach and how much, so questions like these would provide important information. There is also value in asking general questions about junior and senior scholars’ perceptions of outreach. For example, junior scholars might be asked whether they agree or disagree with statements such as, “There is very little benefit to presenting my research to nonacademic audiences”;

“My senior colleagues will think less of me if I give an interview to a reporter”; and “I would like to present my research to nonacademic audiences, but I worry that this is not a good use of my time before tenure.” The survey might ask senior scholars about their views of junior scholars who give interviews to reporters, present their research to nonacademic audiences, and so forth.

However, senior scholars may be reluctant to express negative views about junior scholars who engage in outreach activities on a survey. Therefore, the experimental portion of the survey would present senior scholars with anonymous descriptions of candidates for tenure. With the qualifications of those candidates held constant, the experiment would manipulate whether a person also engaged in outreach activities and which type (e.g., wrote for a blog or talked to news organizations). The ratings of the same untenured people could then be compared with and without participation in specific outreach activities. Although senior scholars may be reluctant to state that outreach activities are negative when asked a simple survey question, their ratings may indicate otherwise. Another manipulation in the experiment might explore whether certain types of information and/or attributes of junior scholars reduce or exacerbate the bias against those who engage in outreach activities (to the extent that a bias exists). This survey and experiment about junior and senior scholars’ views will provide valuable information for designing solutions that effectively promote outreach activities among junior scholars. ■

NOTES

1. For purposes of this analysis, I consider assistant professors, postdocs, and graduate students to be junior scholars.
2. Several scholars who engaged in such activities as assistant professors are already tenured. For example, consider two of the junior scholars cited in the following paragraph (i.e., Hyde and Butler). Both benefited from interactions with political practitioners as assistant professors, and both now have tenure (at Yale University and Washington University in St. Louis, respectively).
3. One possible model for these fellowships is the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Policy Fellowship Program. Through this program, scholars learn how to be more effective in nonacademic domains, and participating institutions learn that there is value in the academic knowledge base.

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