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Why You're Doing This: Sustaining Joy and Inspiration in the Scholarly Vocation

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Introduction

A senior faculty member began his welcome remarks for new scholars by reminiscing of a time when, back when he was a graduate student, he and an older professor spent one Friday afternoon and early evening parsing through books and journals. They were searching, to no avail, for the proper reference for an elusive footnote. When they finally succeeded, relieved and exhausted, the then-graduate student picked up his belongings and headed to the door. To his visible surprise, the older professor walked back to his desk and uncapped a pen, readying himself to mark a pile of essays. Seeing the puzzled look on his mentee's face, the professor explained, "you know, a life spent in footnotes and marking essays is a pretty good life."

We are not going to romanticize the pursuit of a PhD in political science. Sometimes a doctorate will be exhausting and demoralizing, warranting the cautions and concerns detailed in other chapters of this book. And yet, you might notice that most of us penning these chapters have decided to pursue a career in academia. In this chapter, we thus want to explain why all these scholars, otherwise very good at diagnosing the shortcomings of the field, decide to continue being part of it. They could very well take their talents to other sectors, many of which provide better pay and more control over their job's geographic location.

Three Virtues of a PhD in Political Science

A PhD in political science has at least three virtues, which, combined, make a doctorate in political science the entry point to the "pretty good life" the senior professor spoke about. First, academic work is fundamentally *creative*, providing its practitioners nearly unparalleled opportunities to learn, generate, and share new ideas. Second, it is also quite *independent*, in that scholars—even during doctoral studies—enjoy a remarkable degree of latitude in deciding what to research and how to manage their time. And, last but not least, political scientists are well-suited to *contribute* to society through mentorship, research, academic leadership, public scholarship, and public service. Each of the three sections below discusses one of these virtues.

Before we move to those sections, however, we want to make two additional points. First, a life in academia is, at least to many of us, not only a job but (also) a vocation. It is replete of questions that nag us long after working hours, that drive us to scribble thoughts on paper napkins, and that we feel personally invested in. This feeling maps onto the etymological origin of a "vocation" as a summons. We all need something in life we are passionate about and most of us also need a job. Those two things need not be satisfied by the same endeavor, but in academia they often are. This has the benefit that

we get to work on things we are passionate about and that draw us in, but can also compound some of the negative challenges of academia: rejection might feel particularly personal and maintaining healthy work-life boundaries can be hard (see chapter 64 on health and well-being and preventing burnout). But similarly, successes can feel incredibly validating and it can sometimes be invigorating to have a career you are so passionate about.

A second point: you are not stuck in academia. You always have outside options. If mid-way during your PhD, you realize that academia does not bring you joy or that overall you are enduring it more than enjoying it, you can always walk away (see chapter 66 on deciding to leave the program). We academics tend to forget this or treat it as a tragic change of heart. There is nothing tragic about it. Choosing to leave academia is most frequently simply a question of personal goals, needs, and priorities. We acknowledge that of course many people do not so much choose to leave academia but rather have the choice forced upon them, most typically by the vagaries of a precarious job market.

Whether you ultimately complete your degree or not, the education you receive during your doctoral studies will serve you very well to score terrific (and often more lucrative) jobs in other sectors: consultancy, non-governmental organizations, start-ups, or the public sector, for example. Many people with PhDs in political science have decided that they prefer to pursue a job in other sectors where they thrive. Below, we discuss three of the reasons why we decided we wanted to stay.

Creativity

As you slog through PhD admissions essays and GRE tests—and in graduate school, wrestle with response papers, problem sets and qualifying exams—it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that academic life is creative in myriad forms. Most obvious of these is the creativity that accompanies conducting research about a topic that you find compelling and worthwhile. If you're currently an undergraduate student, chances are you have not had many encounters with this particular joy just yet. Most of the assignments you're completing on the way to a bachelor's degree are designed to reflect the extent to which you have absorbed and integrated others' ideas.

By contrast, scholars generate their *own* ideas through a process that is by turns exhilarating, laborious, vertiginous—and ultimately deeply satisfying. Often, although not always, research projects are born from the ability to draw connections overlooked by others, imagine ways to approach questions that change our assumptions about the world, and think beyond established conversations. And it's not just the finished product—the dissertation, book, or article that results from your work—that yields gratification. Most scholars will say that it's also the creative steps taken on the way, like creating a graph, composing a particularly compelling paragraph, or unearthing a new dataset, that can make political science such a satisfying vocation.

Another attractive aspect of this creativity is that your ideas become part of a conversation with other scholars who share your curiosity and passion about your topic. This conversation unfolds in many places simultaneously, including academic conferences, books and journal articles, and online in arenas like blogs and social media platforms. It can be unnerving to have your ideas discussed, examined, and refined in this recursive process. But when conducted in a respectful, collaborative, and supportive manner, this peer discussion is a time-tested way that we as an intellectual community develop cumulative insight—and that you as a scholar get to contribute to a growing body of knowledge.

Research is just one of several avenues of creativity available to those who pursue the scholarly vocation. Teaching can be another tremendously creative endeavor, regardless of whether you're leading a small seminar or running a large lecture course. Typically, subject to minimal constraints, the material covered in the courses you teach will be pretty much up to you. The same can be said for how you present this material to your students, what you expect them to know, and the ways in which you evaluate their performance. One of the few upsides of the COVID era for academia is that creative teaching innovations—including flipped classrooms, online breakout sessions, and evaluations that go beyond the traditional in-class “blue book” essay format—have become more necessary and thus more welcome. Teaching isn't easy work: running a semester-long lecture course with hundreds of students can feel like producing, writing, directing, and starring in your own Broadway show. But the point is that it's your

show, and each of these elements involve creative decisions that you get to make.

One more aspect of academic creativity in research and teaching is that your work is *your* work. It's your name that appears on the spine of your book, on the top of your syllabus, or in the byline of your op-ed. Over time, these creations accumulate into a body of work that is uniquely yours, allowing you to put your stamp on the world in a way that few other careers permit.

Arguably, many aspects of departmental, university, and disciplinary service can often feel less creative than teaching or research. There are only so many ways to run a meeting, adjudicate among applicants for fellowships and prizes, and engage in the other administrivia of many academic service commitments. But even here, opportunities for creativity can arise. New programs, majors, and degree requirements—or rethinking current ones—require creative thinking. And as any department chair or dean will tell you, a creative approach to problem-solving is often key to fixing the thorny issues that pose challenges for every academic administrator.

Independence

On February 26, 2016, the *Jewish Times* featured the story of Joaquín García, a Spanish civil servant due to receive a medal for decades of loyal work in public administration. But García was nowhere to be found. It soon became clear that he had barely set foot in his job for six whole years, all while collecting a paycheck. Instead, he had spent that time perusing the works of the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. David Graeber mentions García's story in his well-known book, *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), where he argues that a good fraction of the jobs in today's society are completely meaningless. Not only would it make no difference to the world if they suddenly vanished, but they provide no delight to those who perform them.

Discussing whether academic jobs contribute to the world in consequential ways occupies us in the next section. Putting aside the nonchalance with which García missed work or the fact that his job was (quite literally) unnecessary, let us pause on his decision to spend six years reading Spinoza. There is something quite joyful in imagining the feeling experienced by someone spending six years doing exactly what they desire. García had done what he wished for six years. And he had chosen to read Spinoza. The key term here is "chosen," for the ability to decide what to work on is a good predictor of happiness in a job. The Happiness Index is a survey instrument meant to measure overall happiness in multiple domains of life. It gauges happiness at work through six criteria: autonomy is one of them. Other survey instruments measuring well-being at work also center on autonomy, asking respondents whether they enjoy freedom in deciding how to perform their work.

Perhaps one of the greatest virtues of doing a PhD in political science is precisely that you will have remarkable leeway in choosing your research questions, and thus considerable autonomy in deciding how you will spend a good portion of your days. Just like García, you might opt to spend six years reading Spinoza. The difference is that doing it will be your job.

In contrast to most professional endeavors (and even PhDs in other fields wherein doctoral students work in the labs of senior scholars), students of political science enjoy much independence in deciding what they work on. Granted, you do not have full sovereignty and your advisors might steer you in certain directions or away from others. But, even in the initial years of a PhD, you are relatively free to choose what to study. This is rare in today's labor market, even in selective high-paying jobs. For example, corporate lawyers are bound to the interests of the clients they represent and the priorities of their firms.

You say you want to study bureaucrats in Argentina? You can probably do that. Voting patterns in Mississippi are more your thing? You can possibly do that too. You want to follow García's footsteps and read Spinoza for six years? Also a possibility. The independence trickles beyond research. Beside the requirement to teach undergraduate introductory courses, most political scientists imagine, design, and teach classes drawing on their own interests. One of us, for example, taught a course that paired classic punishment theory and discussions of slaughterhouses and pornography during her doctoral studies.

To be sure, while not having a boss (in the common sense of the term) and being sovereign over your own time and topics of inquiry can be liberating, it comes with its own challenges. You are mostly

accountable to yourself. And since your research reflects your interests, putting it “out there” is often a vulnerable experience, wherein it is hard not to take criticism personally. Our research is, indeed, very personal to us. But the independence and flexibility that characterizes the job remains one of the joys of doing a PhD and pursuing a career in academia.

Contributing to the World

Last but not least, academics in political science also have valuable opportunities to make positive contributions to the world through their research, teaching, and service. Each of these dimensions make up an important part of a scholar’s life and can provide unique pathways for impact. A scholar considering what types of contributions they want to make should consider all three of these potential outlets in conjunction with their personal needs, interests, and priorities. Importantly, in pursuing academia as a vocation, it’s critical to embrace the fact that you are a whole person—your work does not define your life, but your life can shape and inspire your work.

While junior scholars, and particularly graduate students, should be intentional about not taking on too much service, this work comes with a subtle form of power that can have important impacts within the academy. Engaging in this work often comes with the benefit of being able to make decisions or implement policies which are capable of improving academic culture. If you find yourself being drawn to certain types of service—mentoring, organizing events, or participating on committees with important decision-making power—think about what specifically draws you to that service and think strategically about how you can use your time for maximal impact (see chapters 31 and 32 on academic and professional service, respectively).

For example, driven by a deep commitment to mentorship, Dr. Mirya Holman created the highly popular newsletter “Mirya Holman’s Aggressive Winning Scholars.” In doing so, she continually creates publicly available mentorship resources through which she can reach thousands of scholars while simultaneously protecting her time. Similarly, seeing a need for better support, community, and communication around the job market, a group of then-graduate students created Support Your Cohort—a group of hundreds of junior scholars who share resources, information, and support during this incredibly difficult time in one’s career. These are just a few examples of how “service” can be used as a tool that makes academia better without absorbing too much of a scholar’s precious time.

Teaching can also serve as an important outlet through which scholars can positively contribute to the world. Through teaching you are actively engaging with and shaping the next generation of global citizens and have real opportunities to help those students find their voice and agency, or to help them think about the world in new and surprising ways. Compared to many other subjects, the students who take political science courses tend to be drawn to work that has broad public impact. Among the students one of us has taught over 15 years in the classroom are alumni who are now early in their careers as advisors to legislators, government data analysts, political campaign strategists, and even elected school-board officials.

And finally, political science scholars have tremendous opportunities to make important impacts on the global world through their research. Public-facing scholarship, which works to make academic knowledge available beyond the ivory tower, is one potential venue for having this kind of impact. Through blogs, podcasts, or public reports, political scientists can help the public make sense of the day’s most pressing issues around the world; providing important historical context, understanding, and insight into how events will unfold. Graduate students interested in making an impact through public scholarship have the opportunities to learn the skills and techniques of this public-facing work through APSA’s Public Scholarship program (see chapter 26 on public scholarship). Additionally, scholars can make important impacts by building partnerships outside of academia, using their research to address community-identified needs. APSA’s Institute for Civically Engaged Research can serve as an excellent starting point for this type of work, providing training in how to engage in this type of partnership. Additionally, the wonderful Research 4 Impact program (<https://www.r4impact.org/>) helps match researchers to community organizations in order to create mutually beneficial partnerships.

Conclusion

“Why am I doing this?” is a question almost every PhD student asks themselves on a regular basis. Indeed, this is an important question for us all to continually reflect upon as we consider graduate school, progress towards a degree, and advance through our years as scholars. While this question is frequently inspired by the true challenges of academia, the examination of why we do what we do is fundamentally constructive. We hope we have shown here that the answer to why you're doing this can embrace some combination of the creativity, independence, and public contributions that are uniquely made possible by a career as an academic political scientist. If these answers don't resonate, you may wish to consider the many other good options open to you instead of getting a PhD in political science—or, if you are already pursuing a PhD, in place of an academic career.

The challenges, barriers, puzzlements, and idiosyncrasies that accompany a life in academia are formidable. But for each of us it is rare that a week goes by without experiencing at least one moment of being slightly dazzled by the remarkable fact that we get to do this for a living. These are the moments that remind us that academia is more than a job, but is truly a vocation: a worthy calling that requires sustained dedication and brings genuine joy.

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