The Realities Facing Graduate Students: Before, During, and After the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Committees from the American Political Science Association (APSA) on the status of graduate students in political science conducted digital surveys in 2018, 2020, and 2022. Distributed using listservs from APSA, the surveys asked about a range of realities facing graduate students including employment opportunities, industry or academic support, and overall well-being. Analysis of the data pre-, during-, and post-pandemic revealed high anxiety in 2018 as part of students' experience looking for jobs. By 2020 and 2022, anxiety worsened, such that the well-being of graduate students in political science should be addressed. We recommend a change in the structure of graduate academic programs to include stronger institutional support and an emphasis on alternative paths for work that does not entail teaching at an academic institution.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic posed an exceptional challenge for academics of all ranks and statuses. However, vulnerable academic populations were especially impacted by the pandemic in ways that have not been satisfactorily explored. This article takes advantage of three surveys distributed by the American Political Science Association (APSA) Committee on the Status of Graduate Students spanning the pandemic to shed light on potentially overlooked inequities (Zahneis 2020).[1] These surveys illuminated three of the main issues facing graduate students: difficulties in the job market, support and inclusion in the profession, and financial security. Based on the data of three distinct surveys, we argue that changes are needed in transparency on the job market, diversity outreach for the profession of political science, and reliable and predictable funding. Other points noted are a summary analysis of the data.

The surveys represent three different periods: pre-pandemic (2018), mid-pandemic (2020–2021), and post-peak-pandemic (2022).[2] The surveys (except for the 2022 survey) were not intended to be part of a comprehensive research design; however, in retrospect, they have proven useful for tracing the issues that face graduate students and recent graduates in political science. This effort follows a tradition of reflective work on the profession and the significant issues facing underrepresented and underserved communities (Osorio, Parker, and Richards 2022a, 2022b; Piscopo et al. 2022). Differences in the surveys are further discussed in the survey data section of this article and represented in table 1. This research is a compilation of survey data across three years from a sample that may or may not consist of the same respondents. Nevertheless, all respondents were from the field of political science, either through association with APSA, an academic institution, or a career under the academic umbrella of political science.

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This article presents the survey responses, spanning the three survey iterations. We focus on the major themes that stem from the survey responses (i.e., the job market, diversity and inclusion, and financial support) and how they have changed throughout the course of the pandemic. Our choice of themes was driven by the focus of the surveys. The 2018 survey was designed to collect information about graduate-student experiences on the job market. The 2020–2021 survey was designed with a focus on departmental practices, specifically surrounding issues of diversity and inclusion, but it also covered several important questions related

The APSA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession added specific questions to each survey that, by default, would disaggregate graduate students from the general population of respondents. However, the 2018 and 2020–2021 surveys both included postgraduates because respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences as graduate students on the job market. Therefore, individuals who were on the job market but recently had received a position were included because their responses reflect their experiences as graduate students.

We argue that changes are needed in transparency on the job market, diversity outreach for the profession of political science, and reliable and predictable funding.

to financial security. The 2022 survey was designed to cover the broad scope of questions with emphasis on the top issues facing graduate students in political science, including the job market, inclusion and support in professional and departmental culture, and financial stability and funding. A qualitative word cloud drawn from the 2022 survey reflects the top issues facing graduate students (figure 1). The biggest words in the cloud are "Job" and "Support"; "Funding" is shown as a smaller word in the cloud. These key issues are represented across all three surveys and therefore discussed thematically in this article. We also make several specific recommendations for graduate-level institutions and professional organizations related to these themes to improve the outreach to graduate students within the profession.

SURVEY DATA

The surveys were collected electronically via email during three different periods: pre-pandemic (2018), during the pandemic (2020–2021), and the latter stages of the pandemic (2022). Each survey had a focus and sample makeup, some of which overlap the three periods. Electronic surveys were collected in 2018 (N = 245), 2020–2121(N = 314), and 2022 (N = 277) as part of the annual APSA outreach to students and professionals in political science (see table 1).

APSA membership listservs were used for the 2018 and 2022 surveys. The 2020–2021 survey included outreach via Twitter and direct email to political science departments, resulting in a broader range of participants. Unlike the annual spring surveys of 2018 and 2022, the 2020–2021 survey was sent at a different time of the year to gauge urgencies that may have developed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2018 survey, targeted to APSA members who were graduate students, was conducted pre-pandemic, from June to July. The questions were primarily about job-market experiences. The 2020–2021 survey was conducted in December 2020 and January 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It targeted a wider audience that included APSA members and nonmembers in the political science profession. The questions were intended to gauge how graduate students felt about personal and professional issues. Designed as a supplement to the 2018 survey, the responses in the 2020–2021 survey covered not only job-market prospects but also personal issues that may correspond to the intervening pandemic. The 2022 graduate-student survey was conducted from May to June using the APSA listserv from the 2018 and 2020 surveys. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the utility of APSA membership and to update the previous years' questions about inclusivity and the financial status of graduate students in political science.

Generalities of the surveys include confirmation of long-standing membership of the participants.[3] Among the 245 respondents in the 2018 survey, 55.5% held a PhD degree but were unemployed, 40% were ABD students, 1.6% were non-ABD PhD students, and the remainder did not specify their academic identity. In 2020 (N = 314), 89.5% had been members of APSA for up to five years and 70% indicated that they regularly attend the APSA conference. We found that graduate students joined APSA for strategic reasons. Almost 65% of respondents maintained APSA membership because it allows them to attend the annual meeting at a lower cost. Additionally, 50.5% became a member of APSA to connect to the profession via publications and peer support. Furthermore, 46.2% joined to gain access to APSA eJobs, and

Table 1
Description of Surveys

Year	Time	Focus	Sample Makeup	Sample Size
2018	June–July 2018	Job market, financial, and professional issues	APSA member graduate and postgraduate students	245
2020–2021	December 2020, January 2021	Job market, financial, personal, and professional issues	Students and professionals	314
2022	May–June 2022	Top financial, personal, and professional issues	APSA member graduate students	277

Word Cloud of Additional Comments, 2022 Survey

Table 2

Graduate Student Respondents' Reported Race or Ethnicity Across Surveys

Year	Non-Hispanic White	Latino/a or Hispanic American	Asian (other than Middle Eastern)[6]	Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American	Middle Eastern or Arab American	Native American	Pacific Islander	Other	Prefer not to respond or blank
2018	62%	10.2%	6.5%	4.1%	2.9%	0.4%	0%	3.7%	18%
2020–2021	63.7%	11.1%	8.6%	3.5%	3.2%	0.6%	0.3%	2.9%	12.7%
2022	56.7%	7.6%	15.9%	6.5%	2.5%	1.1%	0.4%	4.7%	11.2%

40.4% stated that eJobs provided them with networking opportunities. Only 3.6% joined because they care about supporting the association.

However, all of the surveys lacked nonwhite participants (table 2). This opens the door to deeper questions regarding outreach and inclusion of diversified graduate students across the country. A more diversified sample may reveal different or other issues facing graduate students in political science and provide insight on a more comprehensive approach to supporting the next generation of political scientists.[4] Because there has not been a comprehensive population-level survey of graduate students in political science, we do not know whether these responses are representative of the graduate-student population at large. However, simply considered as raw numbers, the lack of nonwhite participants remains concerning and reflects the conclusions drawn from the research conducted on the discipline as a whole (Khan et al. 2022).

Acknowledging that our comparative analysis is across three surveys with varying participants, the results cannot be considered empirically absolute. However, acknowledging that some participants may have responded to all three surveys, the results offer merit. We carefully selected questions that were constant across all three surveys to provide continuity across our results. The first theme is on the topic of job-market experiences; the second theme is inclusion within graduate departments; and the third theme is financial security and funding. The purpose of all analysis and results is to add clarity to issues in the profession of political science from surveys launched by the nation's largest membership organization for political scientists.

THE JOB MARKET

The main concern of graduate students is job prospects. This was made clear in the 2022 survey, in which 50.2% of respondents ranked job prospects as their top issue. Graduate students are uniquely concerned about going on the job market. Many apply to numerous jobs, with few prospects of success. The surveys as a whole paint a picture of graduate students doing everything they can to find employment after graduation. Graduate students clearly prefer tenure-track jobs in desirable locations, but they are willing to explore other options as they navigate the job market.

In the written comments in all three surveys, most respondents expressed pessimism about the job market and were very

COVID-19 pandemic. The job market shrank during the pandemic, and the online interview process at that time imposed great pressure on job candidates (McGrath and Diaz 2021). Furthermore, in the 2020–2021 survey, 68% of respondents believed that their programs prepare them well for academic jobs. This is in stark contrast to the 58% of respondents who believed that their programs do a poor job of preparing graduate students for nonacademic jobs (figure 2). This demonstrates that graduate students generally are not well supported in their search for a postgraduate career. From these surveys, we drew several conclusions.

First, graduate students apply to several jobs and spend substantial time on the job market. Of our respondents, 63.7% applied

> *Most respondents expressed pessimism about the job market and were very unsatisfied with the experience, even if they ultimately accepted a job offer.*

unsatisfied with the experience, even if they ultimately accepted a job offer. When they were asked about what could be improved, many respondents mentioned that the application and hiring processes must be more efficient and transparent, and they frequently highlighted the lack of transparency around the status of jobs and whether they had been filled. Some also suggested that there should be more attention and resources for underrepresented groups, including international scholars. Finally, there was a demand for more information about nonacademic job opportunities.

Taken holistically, the responses display a wariness about the job market in the pre- and post-peak-pandemic periods. In the 2018 survey, there was a general malaise about the process of getting hired, even among those who accepted an offer. This trend became more concerning in the surveys conducted during the

for more than 25 jobs and 37.5% applied for more than 50. Additionally, the data suggest that applying for more jobs results in receiving more offers: respondents who applied for between 26 and 50 jobs had a higher success rate. Nevertheless, about 9.4% of respondents applied for more than 50 jobs but did not receive any offers. In all, 63% applied for jobs and accepted an offer in the 2017–2018 academic year; 37% were unsuccessful.

Second, the 2018 survey unsurprisingly indicated that among jobseekers, tenure-track positions were the most preferred (86.9%),[5] followed by postdoctoral positions (59.6%); 40.4% of respondents also applied for non-tenure-track jobs. However, nonacademic jobs (32.2%) and jobs in academic administration (10.6%) were the least preferred among respondents. When they were asked about experiences in finding nonacademic jobs, some assumed that different skill sets than those acquired in

Figure 2

2020–2021 Q30: How Well Does Your Program Support and Prepare Graduate Students for Nonacademic Careers (e.g., Policy Analyst, Political Consultant)?

How well does your program support and prepare graduate students for non-academic careers?
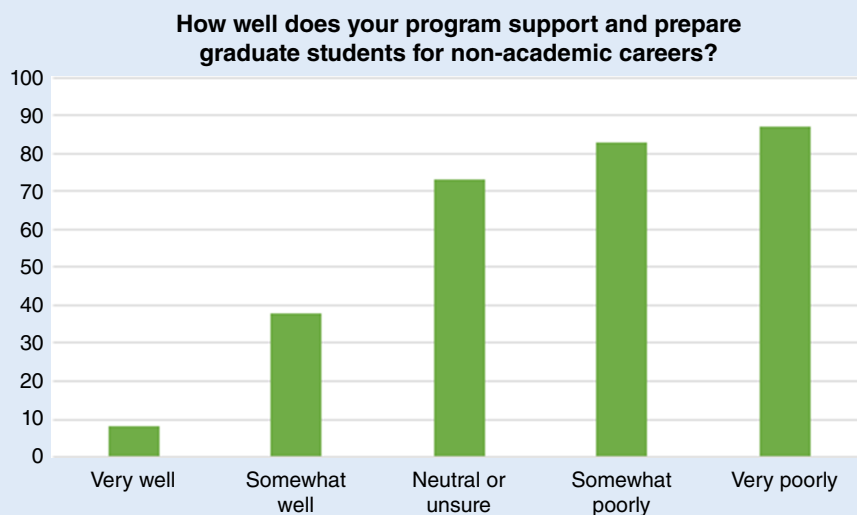
their PhD training were required for academic administration jobs. This led to the conclusion that political science graduate students may not be competitive candidates when applying for administrative jobs.

Third, when they were asked to select and rank from a list of factors those that were most important to a graduate student's job search, the results were interesting. Professional fit was ranked by 39.1% of respondents as the most important factor and 71.4% ranked it as one of the important factors. Location also was important: 16.5% ranked it as the most important factor and 75.6% ranked it as one of the important factors. Unfortunately, this meant that the elements making a job most desirable are beyond the control of individual institutions, which generally cannot change location or fit. Other elements that are under institutional control, however, were ranked as a top factor, including teaching load (49.4%), salary (46.1%), and reputation (44.5%). However, none of these factors received more than 10% of first-place votes. The qualitative responses added more nuance to this framing as well. Although most respondents thought that location was a decisive factor, some written responses prioritized receiving a job offer over living in the United States. Some respondents also specified that visa sponsorship, safety considerations, and departmental diversity were their key criteria—but most specified that any job would be welcome.

Fourth, respondents used various resources to assist their job search. APSA's eJobs list was used by the majority (77.6%) of jobseekers, which emphasizes the utility of this service. A majority also relied on personal networks (51.8%). Some obtained job information from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (40%) and *Inside Higher Education Careers* (32.2%). Other useful resources included the International Studies Association, European Political Science Association, jobs.ac.uk, HigherEdJobs, and listservs of specialized fields. Social media platforms such as Twitter also were identified as a valuable source.

Fifth, when seeking advice about job applications, many respondents agreed that their advisors (30.6%), other professors at home institutions (28.6%), and personal networks (24.1%) provided particularly useful information. Departmental assistance such as professionalization workshops also were mentioned as helpful. However, no consensus emerged, which suggests that respondents seek a variety of sources for advice beyond only their dissertation advisors.

INCLUSION IN PROFESSIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL CULTURE

Whereas the job market dominated graduate-student concerns, the second-most important issue identified in the surveys was inclusiveness, defined by APSA as "'the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement of our diversity' in an equitable manner. Inclusion also involves creating a welcoming and safe environment, culture, and climate that values and promotes respect for all" (American Political Science Association n.d.). The attentiveness and dissatisfaction with diversity were made more apparent by the lack of diversity among graduate students, as shown in table 2. Graduate students are concerned about fitting into both their departmental culture and the profession at large, and they expressed concern that they do not receive enough support from their department to assist them with problems that arise in these environments. These issues were covered in the 2020–2021 survey and revisited in the 2022 survey. When they were asked whether the profession is tolerant and respectful of differences in political opinions, responses from the 2020–2021 and 2022 surveys were approximately equally distributed across the spectrum: one third indicated that they agreed, one third indicated that they were unsure, and one third indicated that they disagreed. However, when they were asked about whether the profession is tolerant and respectful of racial and ethnic differences, respondents were less optimistic about the profession, with almost half (46%) indicating lack of tolerance and respect for racial and ethnic differences. Similarly, 45% of respondents indicated that they do not believe the profession is tolerant of sex and gender differences.

The 2022 survey elaborated further on questions of inclusiveness in the academic environment at respondents' institutions. Overall, responses reflected a similar pattern as in the earlier survey; when they were asked if their department was inclusive, approximately one third indicated that they were (34%), slightly less indicated that they were not (27%), and many were either unsure (20%) or offered no response (19%). These results do not diverge significantly from the 2020–2021 survey results, which indicates that the problem of inclusiveness still exists. However, responses may have reflected the race of the participants. In 2022, 56.7% of the sample was white, 10.8% was Asian, and single-digit

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Figure 3
2020–2021 Q2: Overall, How Do You Feel About Your Own Financial Security?
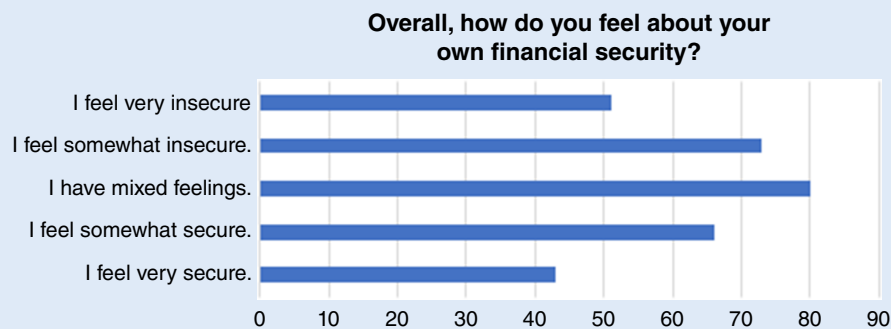
percentages comprised those who were Latino, Black, and Indian; the lowest percentages were Native American, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian. Being white may have contributed to the unrecognized privilege of not being excluded—hence, the uncertainty shown in the homogenous responses.

FINANCIAL SECURITY AND FUNDING

Another major issue facing graduate students was financial security. With increasing costs and stagnant stipends, few graduate students were expected to feel financially secure or prepared for the future (Strayhorn 2010). The 2020–2021 survey reflected this: of the

post-peak-pandemic due to the reshuffling of other financial obligations during the pandemic—or perhaps financial security was not as stressful as finding a job.

With these general conclusions, we present recommendations for institutions and professional organizations. First, we recommend that institutions assist non-minority students in gaining a clear awareness of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts being made. A DEIA online seminar for all students is an effective way to ensure a clear understanding of what inclusion is and what the institution is doing to promote it. When an almost equal distribution of graduate students believes that their depart-

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314 respondents, 35% felt somewhat or very secure financially, 25% had mixed feelings, and 40% felt somewhat or very insecure (figure 3). This financial (in)security manifested in participants seeking outside employment to make ends meet: 38% indicated that they have "side jobs" or "gigs" to financially support themselves and/or their family. An additional 22% of respondents had not sought outside jobs but might do so in the future. Student loans were not contributing to financial distress because the majority reported having no such debt. Furthermore, less than 50% of respondents reported that they had outstanding student-loan debt pre-graduate school, of which only 21% were very concerned about it.

Health insurance was a nonissue for most graduate students. The majority (78%) reported having health insurance through their institution and that premiums were fully or partially covered. However, the most telling question about financial concerns was whether students had seriously considered withdrawing from their graduate program due to financial reasons. Whereas 59% of respondents reported that they had never considered withdrawing, 41% reported that they often or sometimes had considered leaving university. Financial concerns were most prevalent for students with families. The overwhelming majority (67%) indicated that they would not feel sufficiently financially secure to have a(nother) child.

The 2022 survey returned to the question of family planning as a proxy for financial security in which 23% of the sample had children living at home. The three top frequencies for the ages of children were 5–12 years old (7.6%), 2–4 years old (4.3%), and younger than 2 years old (6.5%). The number of respondents with children living at home was 10% higher in 2020 (33%). The data suggest that the financial stability of graduate students with children declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, not unexpected during an economic shutdown during the intervening years.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, respondents were anxious about future job prospects and felt ill supported to succeed, with some concerns about funding or financial stability. One mitigating factor in the surveys was the fact that respondents were predominantly white and appeared to lack clarity about whether their university department was inclusive of racial differences. Financial insecurity was the least-critical issue reported in the 2022 survey; during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), more than 50% reported feeling mixed, somewhat, or very secure. Financial security may have increased

ment is and is not tolerant of racial, ethnic, sex, and gender differences, there clearly is a major problem that must be addressed.

Moreover, APSA must conduct more strategic outreach to bring minorities into the organization to help balance the profession. The fact that all three surveys had single-digit representation of minority respondents is disconcerting. Racially inclusive posts on a website is not outreach. Our suggestions for authentic outreach are as follows: (1) print posters and distribute them to minority-serving institutions (MSIs) for posting in residential and dining halls as well as around campus; (2) allocate representatives at MSIs to hold live sessions or town halls about what APSA offers; (3) offer free conference invitations to selected MSIs (separate from the scholarship and reimbursement online applications), which has been shown to advance the academic prospects of underserved students (Willoughby-Herard 2020); and (4) create and promote an APSA video on social media targeted to minority students in political science.

Second, we recommend that institutions and professional organizations work together to make the job-market experience smoother and more transparent. We call for an overhaul of the APSA eJobs page, requesting that it immediately be made free for all to access. In addition, APSA should take the lead in working toward a more transparent job market by requiring that departments that post vacancies on eJobs provide regular updates on the status of the search. This feature within APSA eJobs is rarely used by departments. APSA should require that departments update applicants when the job search has advanced beyond the application-review stage. A major concern of respondents was the frequent "ghosting" that happens when an individual applies for a job. Some respondents who reported that they received a first-round interview never heard back about the status of their application. This practice causes needless mental anguish that can be alleviated.

Furthermore, departments, institutions, and APSA should work to increase awareness and preparation of nonacademic jobs in political science. APSA eJobs could be expanded to allow nonacademic employers to post job vacancies, directly targeting highly skilled, well-qualified PhDs. This would support graduate students who sought but did not receive a job offer. Similarly, departments should realize that many of their graduate students will seek nonacademic or teaching positions. Departmental faculty must recognize their inherent blind spot: their own experiences on the job market may not be relevant to many of their graduate

students. Because of this blind spot, they provide few resources to help students obtain these nonacademic or teaching positions, assuming that the only outcome is a tenure-track research position. This effort could be facilitated by APSA through training offered specifically for departmental faculty to support students seeking alternative employment.

Third, departments should do more to provide for the financial security of their graduate students, preferably by increasing stipends, teaching assistant compensation, and other work-related grants. Although there were few minority-student survey respondents, there likely is unawareness among non-minorities in the profession about the discrepancy of funds available for graduate students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities, where most PhD students do not receive any stipend and must pay for their graduate degree directly or through loans. We also recommend that universities and institutions consider providing other services such as subsidized or free childcare.

Ultimately, we recommend that graduate departments, professional organizations, and the general population of political scientists take seriously these sobering observations on the status of graduate students. Together, we can work for a future in which the next generation of political scientists is supported and well served during their educational and professional journeys.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The authors express their gratitude to all of the members of the APSA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students who served between 2018 and 2022. The committee has a rotating membership in two "cohorts," with each member serving a two-year term so that each year, 50% of the committee rotates off.

2. We hesitate to use the phrase "post-pandemic" because according to all indications, the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing at the time of writing. However, the political and social will to treat the situation as an ongoing pandemic has waned significantly, so we use the term "post-peak-pandemic" to represent this change in attitude if not in material conditions.

3. There is an ongoing concern that all of these surveys may miss a graduate-student population that is not engaged with APSA. Unfortunately, because these surveys were distributed by APSA, we have no way to remedy this issue.

4. In each survey, several respondents identified with more than one racial or ethnic group. In these instances, respondents were counted once for each group with which they identified. In the 2018 survey, there were 16 such respondents, 18 in 2020–2021, and 29 in 2022.

5. These statistics total more than 100%, which reflects that jobseekers applied to many different types of jobs at the same time.

6. Because the 2020–2021 survey used the category "Asian (other than Middle Eastern)," respondents reporting to be "East Asian or Asian American" or "South Asian or Indian American" were aggregated into the former category for comparability across survey years.

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