Why, and How, to Bridge the "Gap" *Before* Tenure: Peer-Reviewed Research May Not Be the Only Strategic Move as a Graduate Student or Young Scholar

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ABSTRACT Graduate students and young scholars with a passion for making a difference in the real world through research are often advised to put those dreams to rest until after tenure. This contributes to the enduring frustration on both sides of the "theory–policy gap" but it is sound advice—as of right now tenure decisions tend not to take into account publications appearing in policy outlets. However, the job market—and some of the most important mechanisms used for making promotion decisions in academia—suggest good strategic reasons for trying to have your research influence policy as early in your career as possible.

Graduate students and young scholars with a passion for making a difference in the real world through research are often advised to put those dreams to rest until after tenure (Nye 2008a). Although contributing to the enduring frustration on both sides of the "theory–policy gap" in international relations and related subfields, this is sound advice—as of right now, tenure decisions tend not to take into account publications appearing in outlets such as *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy* (Maliniak et al. 2011; Marshall and Rothgeb 2011). However, the job market—and some of the most important mechanisms used for making promotion decisions in academia—points in a different direction.

THE THEORY–POLICY "GAP" IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Relations between scholars and policy makers are dominated by a sense of chasm. Policymakers tend to perceive scholarly outputs as abstract discussions specifically tailored to satisfy the intellectual demands of other scholars, while scholars usually disdain the oversimplifications and lack of analytical rigor of policy officials. The sources of the problem are also well known: different structures of professional incentives drive the worlds of ideas and practice away from each other. Scholars need to invest in publishing theoretically- driven and methodologically- rigorous research because that is what their field values the most, whereas policy makers need to solve pressing policy problems on a real-time basis as a means of increasing their chances of staying in office (Anderson 2003; George 1993; Isaac 2013; Jentleson 2002; Krasner 2011; Lepgold and Nincic 2001; Lupia 2013; Nye 2008b; Walt 2005).

Those disturbed by this state of affairs have reacted constructively to it. Prominent scholars have acknowledged that the responsibility falls on to academics to justify how taxpayer money that funds political science research is spent (Lupia 2014). Other scholars and policy makers with career-long records of bridging the theory–policy divide have begun to distill actionable proposals on how to actually connect the worlds of ideas and action (e.g. Lowenthal and Bertucci 2014). Meanwhile, others have emphasized that, for example, through blogging in outlets such as *Foreign Policy* and *The National Interest*, the scholar–practitioner "gap" may actually not be as wide as it seems (Drezner 2012).

This is all very good. A problem and some of its main causes have been identified, and experienced people—at times with the support of some leading foundations and institutions—have begun to do, and show others how to actually do, something about it.[1] But save a few exceptions,[2] missing from these debates and initiatives is guidance for graduate students and young scholars. For the most part, the bulk of advice on how to better connect the worlds of ideas and action is tailored to those who have been granted tenure already. And, those who had not, are strongly encouraged to get tenure first and, only then, try to influence policy

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through their research. However, there are good strategic reasons for young scholars and graduate students to try to have their research influence policy as early in their careers as possible.

WHY SHOULD YOU TRY TO BRIDGE THE "GAP" EARLY IN YOUR CAREER?

Data shows that there is a decent chance that you may not end up with your PhD in-hand after years of trying (Council of Graduate Schools 2008). And, even if you do finish, then you will have to face a brutal job market (Drezner 2013). This is particularly true if you do not graduate from one of the top-20 programs (Oprisko 2012). The situation is so dire that some leading universities are debating whether—or have already begun—to cut down the number of students they admit to their PhD programs in the social sciences (June 2014). Whether we like it or not, there are more PhD-holders than tenure-track jobs available. Seventy percent of instructional faculty at US colleges are currently off the tenure track. Of these, only a fraction—such as Professors of the Practice in some policy schools—get benefits. By and large, non-tenure-track professors tend not to get benefits and make on average less than half of what tenure-track faculty make. Under the circumstances, it makes sense to think hard about how to broaden your skill set as to increase the scope of professional alternatives.

Careers in public affairs, international and non-profit organizations, businesses and foundations, are often available to PhD graduates. Political science PhDs have obtained positions in non-profits organizations and think-tanks such as Human Rights Watch, the Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, the American Institutes for Research, Chatham House, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the Council on Foreign Relations. These industries and institutions value many of the skills that you develop, and could develop, while earning your degree. The trick is not to think of careers outside academia as second-best options but as valued and rewarding paths in which you can use your energy and many talents to help make a practical difference in the real world (Lowenthal 2012). Unless you blindly love research and teaching, investing five, six, seven or even more years in producing only peer-reviewed publications could amount to a major attempt at drowning in a glass of water for no beneficial reason.

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Another strategic reason for having your peer-reviewed work reach broader audiences has to do with citation counts—i.e. one of the factors that matters in promotion decisions in academia. Publishing your findings in outlets with audiences broader than the scholarly community could eventually lead to more scholars referencing your work. Data shows that senior policymakers rely heavily on newspapers for making their decisions, and blogs associated with some prominent newspaper outlets (e.g. *The Monkey Cage* and *FiveThirtyEight*) could be already influencing the perception of policy issues of some policymakers as well (Avey and Desch 2014). Scholars with an interest in policy, naturally, read those outlets too. If more people have access to your findings and ideas, this is more people accessing your work and a potentially larger universe of scholars getting in touch with the research you do. Given the actual importance of citation counts on tenure and promotion decisions—and of the Internet as an increasingly important transmission belt of ideas into policy—it is hard to argue against adding visibility to your work whenever possible and feasible.

Finally, there is the question of why young scholars with a passion for applying their skills to important issues beyond the discipline should have to repress such inclination until they are granted tenure. They should, to be sure, hone their theoretical and methodological skills and apply them to producing research of peer-reviewed quality. But, in addition to that, young scholars should also test the relevance of their work to policy issues if trying to make a difference in the world is what ultimately moves them. Drawing policy implications from rigorous research takes its own intensive effort. Nevertheless, it is likely to require less effort if compared to the effort invested in producing peer-reviewed knowledge. Why not do the former once when you have the latter if doing so is likely to make you a better professional—both inside and outside of academia—and feel better about your work?

While many departments tend not to reward publications appearing in policy outlets, it is also true that many young scholars who have been doing policy-relevant research have been granted tenure. The point is not whether to pursue a policy versus a scholarly career with your PhD. Rather, it is how to prepare yourself for being a policy-relevant scholar in a tenure-track position just in case the latter is not an available option or the career path you end up choosing to pursue.

HOW DO YOU BRIDGE THE "GAP" BEFORE TENURE?

Whether inside or outside academia, there is no magic "to-do" list that assures you will be outstanding at the job of your dreams; assessing your work often takes more than just your opinion. Still, there is a list of things you could do as a graduate student (and, if your department's rules and culture permit, you may even do as tenure-track faculty) that will help you pave the way toward having your research and ideas reach a community broader than academia and, perhaps, even influence policy. Remember, even if you eventually decide peer-reviewed research is not for you, there is no better substitute for it while at graduate school and as a young scholar *and*, by trying to reach a broader audience, you would have gained skills quite valued in other sectors as well.

Do peer-reviewed research on pressing policy issues. Choose a research topic in a policy area of obvious relevance (e.g. narcotics, health, the environment, nuclear proliferation, human trafficking, and so on). Do not mind what is known theoretically on the matter or the different methodological ways of going about it when identifying the policy issue that moves you; you will address those questions later on. Focusing on important and enduring policy matters will help you produce policy-applicable knowledge that—through description, explanation, and prescriptions—can respond to the needs of policy makers regarding what is going on in the world and what causes are likely to produce outcomes of interest

(George and Bennett 2005). Choosing research topics primarily for theoretical or methodological reasons is not bad in and of itself, but it is likely to put you one step further away from the type of useful knowledge valued by policymakers and the broader community. Addressing pressing policy issues will also make you an easier match to a myriad of research fellowships opportunities and—as soon as you start doing research on the ground or through some very specific methodological technique—give you the opportunity to briefly reflect on the subject in op-eds or blogs, for example.

Two things are likely to affect whether you will succeed at the latter. First, learning how to write clearly. Do not assume that all scholars write well because that is not necessarily the case (Billig, 2013). Direct, concise, clear, and precise prose and expressions—as those found in the best-written articles in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*, for example—are rewarded both inside and outside academia. Second, developing professional networks with government, non-profit organizations and the private- sector is an excellent way of building connections with the fields you may like to explore career options in. Reaching out to those scholars in your department who already have those networks is usually an effective shortcut to building such networks (Bertucci and Lowenthal 2014). Senior scholars often organize workshops to which you could contribute as a rapporteur, for example. Writing a report on the gist of a debate and its contribution to the literature on the matter may lead to the publication of a working paper or even a peer-reviewed article.[3] Policy Reports authored by PhDs working on issues ranging from US policy toward Latin America and the management of the US–Mexico border, to name just a few examples, have shaped policy and, at times, have even been transformed into actual academic publications (e.g. Heredia and Lawson 2012; Linowitz 1976; Pastor 2014; Tama 2011).

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Early in your career, seek opportunities to participate in government, think-tanks, or task forces. This will not only assist you in building a complementary professional network, it will also help with identifying the actual knowledge needs and time pressures so common outside academia. Knowing how things work in and around the executive branch and related bureaucracies is also key for understanding what it takes, in actual practice, for ideas to influence policy.

Learn how to translate your research findings into prescriptive action plans. Briefly answering what your research project is about, what it amounts to, and what difference it makes, is often a meaningful first step toward such a goal. It is also an exercise likely to help you with your own scholarly research—pushing you to think harder about what you are working on and for what broader policy purpose. Findings published in leading academic journals do not often directly affect policy making (Krasner 2011). Peer-reviewed research does not even tend to offer policy prescriptions to begin with (Maliniak et al. 2011). Still, rigorous explanations often have prescriptive implications that could be placed front and center in analyses of a given policy matter—a type of knowledge that, while policy relevant, would be governed by norms of empirical verification and peer-review.

Master a second or third language and knowledge about a specific region of the world. Although it is far from the only thing that is being published, top-tier journals in international relations do tend to publish more and more articles that apply quantitative methods and formal modeling than not (Maliniak et al. 2011). However, data shows that the knowledge needs of policymakers deciding on national security affairs, for example, are better served by knowledge coming out of contemporary and historic case studies drawing upon expert knowledge of a given area of the world (Avey and Desch 2014). To policy makers and for the time being, area studies and qualitative research are methodologies as valuable as sophisticated quantitative techniques, if not more valuable.

To be sure, I am emphatically not arguing that PhD students should substitute writing peer-reviewed articles for policy reports or op-eds (let alone if you are a tenure-track professor in a department that tends not to value policy-relevant work). That would be a terrible mistake if what you ultimately want is a solid reputation as a scholar whose policy prescriptions and opinions are backed by a career-long record of publications of the best possible quality. It would also be a mistake even if all you want is a good teaching job at a liberal arts college; it seems to be harder and harder to land any tenure-track job without publications and some teaching experience.

It is also important to bear in mind that the credibility of your policy relevant work largely depends on proving that you can do good research to begin with. If a young person has not yet proven that he is qualified to do quality work (i.e. finish a dissertation, publish reviewed pieces, and so on) chances are his work will not be taken very seriously. Relatedly, being a junior scholar or graduate student usually means being vulnerable to senior faculty and search committees. These may disregard policy relevant work altogether or research findings and policy prescriptions that antagonize with the policy implications of their own research—a situation you would do well in being aware of particularly when trying to land a tenure-track position or going up for tenure or promotion.

Still, the current and foreseeable state of the academic job market, the skills that senior policy makers value the most in making decisions, and one of the main ways in which academia decides on promoting scholars, suggest that it may be a good time for graduate students and young scholars to double their efforts and try to bridge the so-called "gap" early in their careers. It is strategic—and beneficial to the broader community—for graduate students and young scholars to do more than peer-reviewed research, not substitute one for the other.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, the *Bridging the Gap* project co-sponsored by American University; the University of California, Berkeley; and Duke University, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. See also Avey and Desch (2014).
2. See, for example, the New Era Foreign Policy Conference—designed explicitly for PhD students—and the International Policy Summer Institute—opened to faculty of all ranks—both under the *Bridging the Gap* project. See also the International Affairs Fellowship sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations aimed at young and mid-career scholars who seek to broaden their foreign-policy experience beyond their scholarly achievements.
3. A recent example is Bertucci, Borges-Herrero, and Fuentes-Julio (2014).

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