

# The Profession

## Alleviating Professional Immobility in Political Science: Faculty Exchanges as a Remedy

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In the winter of 1990 we conducted a survey of chairpersons of political science departments that confirmed what many of us suspect has been the case in the tight academic job market in recent years: with only a few exceptions political science faculty, especially among tenured ranks, have remained in place.<sup>1</sup> Our results also indicate that there were many more faculty at all ranks who were perceived by their department chairpersons as interested in moving to other academic positions than who actually moved. Further, we found that in terms of the criteria applied by their departmental chairpersons, those who are interested in moving are disproportionately strong performers.<sup>2</sup>

Our results are fully consistent with the common perception that American universities are filled with capable faculty who would like to move to different professional settings but who cannot. This is encouraging neither for the individual faculty members nor their institutions. Both suffer under these circumstances from growing rigidity of routines and conflicts and, thus, from increasing professional inhibitions and repressed initiatives. Even if the wave of retirements projected for the next decade results in an increase in faculty hiring in the social sciences (and this is by no means a certainty), the vast majority of new positions will be targeted on entry-level faculty. Consequently, it is likely the current lack of opportunities for lateral mobility among associate and full professors will remain largely unaffected.

Currently, the only means for most faculty to experience an alter-

native professional setting is comprised of short-term arrangements, including faculty exchanges of limited duration. Our survey found that although experience with exchanges is fairly limited, departmental chairpersons' reactions to the idea of exchanges are *highly* favorable. From 1984-89, fewer than 20% of the departments responding to our survey participated in any short-term reciprocal exchanges of faculty; only 10% had two or more exchanges. Yet, by overwhelming margins, department chairpersons perceive exchanges as positive both for the faculty involved and the department as a whole (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we applaud the recent efforts of the American Political Science Association to facilitate short-term faculty exchanges initiated by individual faculty through listing inquiries about such exchanges in the *APSA Personnel Service Newsletter*. We would encourage an examination of additional means through which

temporary exchanges might be facilitated.

But our preferred agenda involves a bolder move: the possibility of introducing and facilitating *permanent* lateral faculty exchanges. Although many details would need to be worked out, in principle these exchanges would amount to an extension of the logic of temporary exchanges, involving the lateral exchange of roughly comparable faculty between two positions in different institutions without any expectation of reversal. In view of the novelty of the idea—and the fact that it has not, to our knowledge, actually been practiced to any significant degree—the department chairpersons in our study were understandably cautious in their attitudes toward such exchanges. But their caution is of a character that bodes well for the feasibility of permanent exchanges.

As Table 2 shows, department chairpersons' hesitancy with respect

**TABLE 1.**  
Chairpersons' Attitudes Toward Short-Term Faculty Exchanges

Survey Item	Agree Strongly %	Agree Somewhat %	Neutral %	Disagree Somewhat %	Disagree Strongly %
Exchanges help to reduce faculty "burnout"	34.2	51.7	10.8	2.5	0.8
Exchanges allow faculty to avoid responsibilities to their home department	—	3.3	6.6	24.0	66.1
Exchanges provide exposure to new ideas and perspectives	47.1	49.6	2.5	0.8	—
Exchanges are more trouble than they are worth	2.5	17.4	24.0	33.1	23.1
It would be a good idea to expand opportunities for faculty exchanges	47.1	42.1	8.3	2.5	—

For the first question N = 120; for all other questions, N = 121.

**TABLE 2.**  
**Chairpersons' Attitudes Toward Proposal for Permanent Lateral Exchanges**

Involving faculty whose perceived performance is:	Strongly Positive %	Somewhat Positive %	Neutral %	Somewhat Negative %	Strongly Negative %
Very good to excellent	10.2	25.4	26.3	22.0	16.1
Good to fair	4.2	21.0	28.6	29.4	16.0
Marginal to poor	3.4	12.1	12.1	26.7	45.7

Due to "don't knows" written in and questions left blank by some respondents, the percentages are calculated on a slightly different number of responses for each question: N = 118 for the "Very good to excellent" questions; N = 119 for "Good to fair"; and N = 116 for "Marginal to poor."

to such exchanges varies inversely with their perceptions of the quality of the faculty involved. Many chairpersons were willing at least to consider the possibility of permanent exchanges involving faculty with strong records. They were, however, much more hesitant to consider trades involving faculty of lower perceived quality. This reluctance was especially apparent for the department's weakest faculty: the vast majority of chairpersons rejected the idea of trading a faculty member whose shortcomings were known for the less familiar characteristics of a person defined as another department's "problem." Thus we have, in chairpersons' preferences for exchanging only faculty of demonstrably high quality, a safeguard against a department unexpectedly experiencing sharp disappointment through an exchange.

In principle, what currently appears to be a promising undertaking of lateral permanent faculty exchanges could be further examined and initiated by either universities or by discipline-wide faculty associations. If permanent exchanges are

feasible, both types of institutions stand to gain in the long term from their introduction. We think faculty associations are much more likely bets to begin studying the feasibility of permanent exchanges and working for their initiation. This is apt to be the case in part because the associations are relatively flexible and can, if they so choose, invest in innovative activities that are of interest to their members. University administrators, in contrast, stand to experience considerable initial costs in terms of learning how to deal effectively with the new practices permanent exchanges will involve, and they can be expected to be hesitant about voluntarily introducing additional complexity to their lives. Accordingly, we think that faculty associations should get the process underway, and we urge the APSA to begin examining the matter. In our view this is a remarkable opportunity for the Association to engage itself in an activity that holds the promise of offering significant improvement for the professional lives of a substantial proportion of its members.

## Notes

1. Between December 1989 and January 1990 questionnaires were mailed in a single wave to 252 political science and 224 sociology departments offering graduate degrees. The total response rate was 47% for the combined samples. Thirteen responses lacked departmental identification and were thus not usable. The net response rate for political science departments was 48%. Departments responded in roughly equivalent proportions across three categories that we constructed on the basis of reputational prestige. For a more detailed report of the survey results, see Richard M. Coughlin and Charles Lockhart, "Alleviating Professional Immobility in Political Science: Faculty Exchanges As a Remedy," unpublished manuscript, Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 1992.

2. It is important to keep in mind that, although we speak of faculty members' interest in moving, our formal unit of analysis is the department as experienced and/or perceived by the (then) department chairperson.

3. The pattern of results for our "sibling" discipline of sociology is nearly identical. See Richard M. Coughlin and Charles Lockhart, "Alleviating Professional Immobility in Sociology: Faculty Exchanges As a Remedy," *Footnotes* 21 (January 1993): 8.

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