35 Mental Health and the Job Market

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Introduction

Next to finishing up a dissertation, one of the most daunting challenges any graduate student faces is 'going on' the job market. The process itself is grueling, challenging, and often heartbreaking. Yet, unlike the dissertation process, there has been little discussion about the mental toll the job market has on individuals. As academia in general and political science in particular become more competitive, especially as institutions of higher education slash jobs and cut funding, the mere thought of surviving the job market creates anxiety and extreme stress (see chapters 34–48 for various topics related to the job market). In this chapter, we address this daunting task many graduate students face and suggest ideas for individuals and departments to make it all a little less nerve-wracking.

So, why does this conversation even matter? Why did we find the need to talk about the mental health aspect of 'going on' the market in the first place? The harsh, oft-ignored reality of the job market is that it is a full-time job. Academia does not have a common application system like medical schools, where candidates fill out an application with their priority list and a match day occurs to inform individuals where they landed. Instead, each university or college has a very specific niche that they are trying to fill and expect a detailed targeted application for that position. A job seeker in this case must design a job packet for each job that includes a bespoke cover letter, their detailed CV, recommendation letters, teaching and research portfolios, writing samples, and at times diversity statements. That is tens of pages of application material for one job that the candidates have to vet and send in while coordinating with their recommenders. So, even if a candidate applies for twenty jobs in a cycle, this is a serious amount of work hours being spent on something that at best is a game of chance in those early stages.

Now add to this the fact that most candidates are 'on' the market in their final years of graduate school. They are sending out application packages while they are also trying to finish up their dissertations, apply for postdocs, and teach two or three classes given the kind of program they're in. Suddenly, the job market becomes a second job. But the difference here is that the second job decides your future. And that creates a level of stress and anxiety that seeps throughout a person's life—professional and private. And yet candid discussions on how it impacts us all are scant at best.

So, what if it all does work out? The stress surely goes down, right? Well, yes and no. The stress of knowing whether you will be able to have a career in the fall after you finish does go away if you are fortunate enough to land a job. But with that comes the additional load of work that needs to be completed before that stability comes to your life. Between when you receive the job offer, accept, and sign the offer letter and show up for your first day of work, you still need to complete your disserta-

tion, defend it, find housing and then, in most cases, move at least a thousand miles away to a new state or country to start life over without a *support network* of family and friends. The job market is actually very long: it starts in July or August and the last-minute positions keep popping up till March or April. Even in the best-case scenario where you have accepted a job by the end of December, it means you have just six months to wrap up your dissertation, its defense, and essentially your whole life and find a place to move to cross-country. If you were fortunate to get a last-minute position, that means you often have less than 120 days to wrap up everything and move.

Now imagine, in the middle of all of this, you also must tactfully negotiate your salary and perks too. Most colleges and universities do not offer summer pay, which means even if you have an amazing job starting in the fall, for the months of May, June, and July, you are on your own without a steady paycheck. Negotiating other elements of the job are tricky too, i.e., there is no guide on how to do it. All you are trying to do is get the best deal with the constant fear that the university or college might pull out if you dig in too much. Just writing about it is anxiety-inducing; imagine what it feels like to be in the middle of it!

And remember, this happens if you have been extremely lucky and fortunate to have an offer on the table to begin with. If the job market cycle did not work out for you that year, that means you must figure out temporary work to make enough money to survive for the next academic year while you go back on the job market again. And while you do that, you need to figure out a way to deal with the heartbreak and disappointment of not landing a job this year. This severely hampers one's ability to finish up the dissertation and hurts one's confidence for the next market cycle.

There is an added layer of complication for international students who must figure out a way to retain their status in the United States to take another shot at the job market. To start with, their *job prospects* are slim given they can only apply to places that will sponsor them. This puts a large chunk of advertised jobs, especially late in cycle jobs, out of contention for them. And while they are dealing with the anxiety of this, they need to figure out their summer pay, fall plans, dissertation and its defense, and a way they can retain legal status. All of this has a serious impact on a person and their ability to survive the process.

That is why we believe it is important to have a candid discussion about mental health in relation to the job market. There are no silver bullets to erase the stress and anxiety from this process. Our intention is to present suggestions that can make this process a little less nerve-wracking. Below, we outline recommendations for both *job candidates* and institutions with respect to mental health on the academic job market. Many of the struggles of the market are structural, and thus responsibility cannot be placed solely on individuals to manage their mental health. At the same time, there are things you can do on your end to prepare for challenges you will face.

If you are not someone who has previously struggled with mental health, know that the market may test you in new ways. If you have ongoing mental health challenges, the market will likely exacerbate these due to heightened stress. And if you have had challenges in the past from which you have largely healed, be prepared for the market to trigger old behaviors. (One of the authors saw disordered eating return during the market, for example.) All of which is to say that you will likely need new sources of support, even if you do not think you do now, and there is no shame in pursuing them.

Advice for Job Candidates

One of the most exhausting parts of the market is having to explain your experience to people around you. Because of the academic market's unique cycle and lack of choice, family members and partners working in other industries may find it difficult to understand what you are going through, meaning your usual sources of support may be less available. This can make an already-isolating experience feel even worse. Thus, finding people who "get it" with whom you can talk is crucial.

You might think of your job market support network as a triad: peers, faculty mentors, and (insurance allowing) a therapist. First and foremost are peers who either recently went through the market or are on the market at the same time. The year-long referendum on your worth at the thing you've been doing for at least five years will wear anyone down, so it can be very helpful to have a job market

"buddy" with whom you can commiserate. Having another person going through what you are going through and understanding exactly how it feels may not change the fundamentals of your situation, but it can lighten the load, because you no longer have to explain your excitement or disappointment. Peers can also help you feel less alone when you aren't sure how some part of the market works and remind you that your lack of knowledge is probably structural and a product of the hidden curriculum, not a personal failing.

Second, try to identify *faculty mentors* with whom you can speak openly about mental health issues. These may be different mentors than you have relied on in the past. Your dissertation chair may not have gone on the market in several decades, so you need to find faculty who have been through the process more recently. More senior friends can serve in this role, but so can mentors you may have cultivated through other networks (professional organization mentoring programs, conference connections, and so on). Resist the urge not to talk to faculty about your experiences: while peers are also important for support, the nature of the market may make you feel that you are directly competing with friends. In this regard, faculty can sometimes provide a safe and supportive outlet.

Third, seriously consider seeing a therapist, ideally as soon as possible. All of the authors went to therapy during graduate school, and for some of us, it was the single most helpful choice we made. Talking through your experience with someone who is invested in you as a person, but who has no stake in your professional success and does not belong to your broader academic community, can be a very relieving and cathartic practice.

We also recognize that therapists can sometimes do harm, especially to individuals with marginalized identities, and that finding a therapist who clicks with you can take time. Moreover, therapy in the United States is very expensive without insurance. Fortunately, therapy is often more accessible at universities than in the rest of the United States. Campus clinics may offer free sessions, although these are often in high demand and the number of visits may be capped. Therapists in the community may also offer sliding scale payments based on income. Ask more senior graduate students in your program if you are not sure where to start or whether your insurance (if you have insurance) covers therapy (see chapter 69 on counseling and other resources).

The last source of support, perhaps ironically, is yourself. Adding another task to your packed agenda may sound like the least appealing idea in the world while on the market but cultivating habits and hobbies now that build your self-worth gives you something to turn to when staring down rejection after rejection. We advocate devoting time to activities that let you create something on a shorter timeline than is typical in academia—this could include anything from cooking to art to community events—and move your body as much as possible. You may end up feeling too overwhelmed to continue these practices—one of the authors discontinued almost all of their outside hobbies while on the market because they simply didn't have the mental and emotional energy to pursue them—but the sooner you start prioritizing activities outside of academia, the longer before their benefits will wear off if you feel you have to disengage for a while.

Advice for Departments

Creating a less toxic and all-consuming job market experience can be buoyed by the departments supporting and recruiting candidates. Candidates often feel limited agency when on the job market, and changes to that experience also require institutional shifts in how we prioritize candidates' time and well-being. We highlight two potential sources of reform, one from the perspective of graduate students' home departments, and another from the hiring departments and committees themselves. The choices that get made about how to structure the experience will shape graduate students' experiences and expectations.

Departments recruiting candidates can structure their job search in ways that support candidates' mental health, prioritize their time, and limit anxiety over the uncertainty in the process. One easily implemented solution is requiring fewer materials for candidates upfront. Many job candidates feel overwhelmed by the materials required to "go on" the job market because across research statements, teaching materials, diversity statements, and other documents, an academic job application can total

over 50 pages of material. Departments could save applicants considerable stress by asking for only a cover letter, writing sample, and CV during the first round, relieving most applicants of considerable work that goes into many of the statements that candidates put together. Letters of recommendation can also be a tool for final candidates rather than a requirement of all candidates. Similarly, departments should be as specific as possible about the position that they are hiring for. Searches that seek out the "best academic" regardless of rank or subfield can often turn away candidates who can't imagine ever rising to the top of the pool and often benefit traditionally advantaged scholars.

Uncertainty in the job market also manifests in the lack of transparency in the hiring process, where candidates often apply and never hear anything from departments or are given a formal notification from the university more than six months later. Universities are constrained in a number of ways through Human Resources and job listing regulations but offering candidates some information throughout the process can be helpful. Departments can be more transparent about where they are in the process, whether flyouts have been offered, and whether the position has been filled. This information can be communicated through social media channels or through our academic institutions.

Graduate student support from within a student's home institution can also mitigate anxiety by offering more resources, more information, and creating institutional norms for candidates that better address the realities of the job market. Departments with job market candidates should prioritize giving candidates the time and space to pursue the full-time job that is applying for full-time positions both within and outside academia. Adding another job on top of this, in the form of teaching or demanding RA work, means candidates simply cannot devote as much time to the market as they may need to, and the emotional costs can be debilitating. Departments should prioritize funding job market candidates with fellowships in order to minimize candidate stress, meaning resources with fewer requirements and stipulations for students' time. Additionally, if funding is an issue that would prohibit research assistant positions, creating an environment among the grad students and faculty to cover candidates' TA or teaching work as needed would minimize some of the stress.

Departments and faculty could also make a point to be upfront with the candidates and rationally explain to them the state of the job market and talk about the informal, unsaid rules of the market. Currently, many top programs offer just a one-hour info session that is given just once a year. Many of the most helpful conversations are done informally among graduate students, placing a higher burden on students, and advancing those with more extensive networks, resources, etc. Additionally, faculty should talk about their experiences, but more important than their market experience is their experience on a hiring committee. Finally, departments could better prepare candidates by having a seminar-style class that helps the candidates prepare for the market by working through their job market packet. A course like this would be beneficial the semester or year before candidates go on the market, so that when putting together final packets, students do not feel alone. Seminar sessions or workshops devoted to each part of the job packet were incredibly helpful for at least one of the authors.

Conclusion

Throughout the entire academic job market process, it is critical for departments, and candidates, to remember that job market candidates are people first, and the market will affect their personal lives and well-being. Prioritizing mental health—and, for departments, implementing structural changes with mental health in mind—can go a long way toward making the market less painful and helping candidates feel less alone.