

# Creating Resource Pathways: Considering Opportunities and Funding Sources for Women of Color in the Discipline

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According to a 2013 report by the American Political Science Association (APSA), less than 15% of political scientists are women of color. This underrepresentation is especially notable when the group is disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Many reasons exist for this underrepresentation (Bedolla 2014; Hero 2015; Lavariega Monforti and Michelson 2008; Sinclair-Chapman 2015), one of which is the extreme social and intellectual isolation that women of color may feel with so few of us located at institutions across the country. To generate the existence of community within the discipline takes time and resources to which most of us simply do not have access; therefore, we use conferences as a space to connect, create, and collaborate. However, the energy retained from conferences quickly dissipates as many of us return to the demands of administrative work, service requests, and teaching that reduce the time we have available for new research and cross-institutional collaborations.

We situate our work within a much longer lineage of women of color in political science channeling resources and securing funds to build our own spaces in the discipline—spaces for us, by us (Jordan-Zachery 2004; Sinclair-Chapman 2019). In particular, we view our collaborative work as building on the work that Sistah Scholar, People of Color Also Know Stuff (POCAKS), the Women of Color Workshops, and other groups started and to whom we are indebted. Each of these spaces has uniquely responded to the specific needs of women of color in the discipline, ranging from addressing the lack of diversity, inclusion, and retention; to building new pathways for mentorship and networking; and to amplifying the knowledge that women of color hold as experts in their own field (Lavariega Monforti and Michelson 2020). These initiatives are examples of how women of color are finding creative ways to leverage institutional funds to publish, survive, collaborate, celebrate, and expand the boundaries of the discipline. This article introduces the junior women of color collective, provides an overview of our funding experiences from past initiatives, and discusses how critical it is for the discipline to create more funding pathways to support early-career women of color. We share data that show where women of color

previously received financial support and interrogate the ways that we must negotiate with stakeholders and our own contingent status within the academy. Finally, we consider the contradictions inherent within current funding structures in academia and the need to seed a new praxis for funding research and collaborations that is rooted in anti-racist and anti-capitalist logics.

## HOW WE SOUGHT TO CREATE SPACE FOR US

In the spring of 2019, Danielle Lemi and Diane Wong ran into each other at the 2019 Annual Meeting for the Western Political Science Association in San Diego, both of us catching a breath from conference fatigue. We exchanged feelings of exhaustion from the job market, and together we wondered how incredible it would be to be part of a community that prioritized rest, restoration, and collective care. At the time, and after a series of negative experiences on the job market, Danielle had decided to leave the academy. By the end of 2019, she returned to Dallas, where she ultimately would continue to pursue scholarship on her own time as a Tower Center Fellow at Southern Methodist University.

During the next several months, we watched for funding opportunities that would allow us to create a restorative space for junior women of color in the discipline. In June 2019, with the support of two senior faculty members, we applied for the APSA Centennial Center Special Projects Grant. To our surprise, we received the grant, which supported a three-day preconference writing retreat in Puerto Rico that brought together 10 early-career women of color PhDs across institutions, regions, and subfields. We vacillated on the scope of the writing retreat but decided that, based on funding considerations, it would be a space meant for junior women of color PhDs including adjunct, contingent, and other precariously held positions. We wanted to nurture a safe writing environment and holistic approaches to knowledge production, information sharing, and deep-relationship building.

In addition to channeling funds to support junior women of color, we were driven by our personal experiences and desire to heal from various forms of trauma that we had experienced in the academy over the years. In doing so, we had five

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immediate goals for the writing retreat: (1) foster a social community among untenured women of color in political science who will support one another through their career; (2) create an intellectual community of early-career women of color who will provide intensive feedback to one another on research projects; (3) support junior women of color in the

42 participants of diverse women who participate in each session, ranging from graduate students to full professors. The POCAK community has grown to include more than 250 experts in the directory, and it has facilitated cross-institutional collaborations across subfields and rankings. The Women of Color Workshops have had tremendous

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discipline in developing plans to publish their written work; (4) decolonize existing notions of productivity and worth in the discipline so that we can exist as our full selves; and (5) envision new ways of being in relation to academia, ourselves, and one another.

#### **NARRATIVES OF EXISTING INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN OF COLOR**

From conversations that we had with the founders of Sistah Scholar, POCAKS, and the Women of Color Workshops, it was evident that these spaces were created from need and the continued marginalization of women of color in political science. When we asked Dr. Nadia Brown why she created the #SistahScholar community as a mentoring initiative that brings together women of color over Zoom, she shared the following:

I created the space in April of 2020 after feeling the need to connect with womxn of color political scientists who were also figuring out how to deal with the “new normal” of COVID-19. I realized that without an intervention, this pandemic will negatively affect the ability of womxn of color to successfully publish, achieve tenure, and assist junior women—particularly in graduate school—who will follow them into the professoriate.<sup>1</sup>

Maricruz Osorio, a member of the POCAKS team, reflected on the reason they launched the initiative, as follows:

POCAKS started from a Twitter handle that was meant to uplift and highlight work of POC scholars. Danielle Lemi and I saw the need, however, for more. Of course, some things are directly inspired by our colleagues at WAKS, like the expert directory, but the job candidate directory, resources page, and the workshops all came from the direct need we heard from others like us.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the support that these spaces provide, Dr. Jessica Lavariega Monforti expressed the desire to return to the discipline through the Women of Color Workshops: “I attended a similar conference as a junior faculty member and it allowed me to begin to build my professional network. I was moved to pay that forward and help others in the same way.”<sup>3</sup>

Each initiative has grown in extraordinary ways in recent years. The #SistahScholar community has between 27 and

results, with almost 300 participants since the first workshop in 2013. As important as these spaces are and often have served as a lifeline for many women of color in the discipline, the initiatives were launched without much institutional or financial support. For example, Dr. Nadia Brown explained that she pursued funding because she would have to pay out of pocket otherwise, as follows:

I have done so many projects as a labor of love for the discipline because I truly want all the good folk to win. Without university support to pay my graduate assistant and the guest speakers, I paid them out of my pocket. I also paid for a private Zoom account to hold the meet ups. I was paying \$215 a month to support this initiative. While I was happy to personally fund #PSSistahScholar, I was angry that my university would not allow me to use my discretionary funds to support the initiative. I co-wrote a grant with Tabitha Bonilla that was ultimately supported by the Centennial Center.<sup>4</sup>

The institutional barriers and lack of financial support that women of color face reinforce a scarcity mindset that results in feelings of stress, frustration, and anxiety and the false belief that there is not enough room for all of us to succeed.

Funders remain hesitant to provide ongoing support for these initiatives. Maricruz Osorio reflected on why she and her collaborators at POCAK decided to apply for National Science Foundation (NSF) funding and their experiences:

There was a need beyond my own and that’s all we needed to know to decide to invest time into funding applications and working harder to increase the scope of our operations. Of course, we were initially denied. But we pushed back, asked why—if diversity is so important—we aren’t investing in learning best practices in retaining faculty of color. That change in narrative helped us get funding for our first workshop. The success for the first led to success in funding for the second. I am seeking regular support so that I don’t have to keep applying to different small grants for workshops that help the entire discipline.<sup>5</sup>

Despite rank or experience, securing funding for such initiatives often requires women of color to engage in the exhausting labor of defending the merit of their work and sustaining alternative fundraising efforts. Dr. Melissa Michelson reflected on their journey to fund the workshops, as follows:

Every two years, Jessica and I start planning for the workshop months in advance. We submit grant proposals and reach out to ongoing and potential new supporters to ensure we have the funds we need. It's quite a lot of work. Some of the fundraising is based on personal relationships—people who we know who have moved into positions of leadership at their universities or in affiliated organizations. Most of the support comes from the

We also note that funding support varies largely by tenure status. Teaching faculty tend to receive less funding support than research faculty. Moreover, tenured faculty made note of more funding support than nontenured or contingent faculty. This suggests that previous success in obtaining research funding support may be predictive of future support. Although

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NSF and APSA. We couldn't host these workshops without that institutional support. But smaller donations are a way for organizations to signal that they support our mission.<sup>6</sup>

#### GRANT SUPPORT AMONG WOMEN OF COLOR AND ITS LIMITATIONS

We held conversations with other women of color in the discipline and also researched where they have been receiving financial support. In addition to self-funding practices and support from organizations including the NSF and APSA, women of color have received support from several other venues. Focusing on junior women of color at the top-50-ranked degree-granting institutions, these women looked to major organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, and Social Science Research Council for support of their academic work.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, many relied on internal sources of funding for research, teaching, and conference travel. The ways that women of color looked

our analysis is instructive, we note that not all women of color in the discipline are included in the study. The differences in funding and access to funding discussed previously may indicate more significant disparities across the discipline, especially because this study examines variation only among women of color.

In terms of limitations, funding organizations that are interested in supporting junior women of color scholars may be structurally designed to lock out the same people they purportedly want to support. For example, even with a nominal institutional affiliation, contingent faculty may not be eligible to apply for funding from a major foundation because foundations typically award institutions, not individuals. Without full-time employment status with an institution, many women of color cannot seek funding from these foundations. Similarly, funding programs that focus on early-career faculty neglect scholars who are postdocs, visiting assistants, or adjuncts by restricting eligibility to early-career, tenure-track faculty. Although APSA offers

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beyond their own university and US-based foundations to fund their work is notable. We found that women of color were able to access research grants through domestic and international government organizations as well as community-based organizations, local councils, and other nonconventional sources.

In addition to considering where women of color are receiving monetary support, it is important to consider how they are positioned in the discipline. Our data show that 40% of the women included in our sample are American politics scholars, followed by 37% comparative politics scholars. The remaining women of color consider themselves international relations scholars, theorists, and methodologists. This may explain why the majority of grants awarded to women of color are focused on domestic and comparative issues.

small grants to any member, these grants typically are dispersed via personal checks and therefore subject to income tax. For affiliated scholars or independent scholars who cannot access their institutional grant offices, research grants necessarily must be disbursed to the scholar as an individual, who then must budget how much will be taxed. When our writing collective tried to apply for an NSF grant to support retreats for future cohorts of junior women of color, we learned that because Danielle is not employed full-time by a university, she could not be listed on the grant—even as a contracted researcher. By structuring award processes this way, foundations block contingent faculty and independent scholars from even competing—the very people who likely could use the awards to secure a more permanent position.

Whereas some women of color have secured funding through federal agencies and major foundations, there are inherent contradictions within modern funding structures. There is a deep history of foundations engaging in what Francis (2019) calls “movement capture” in which funds are used as leverage to shape the agenda of movement-based organizations. The same risk exists for movement- and university-based scholars who receive funds from foundations and federal agencies that maintain the power to shape the research agenda such that it reinforces neoliberal conceptions of welfare and development. It has become increasingly more apparent that many funding sources for the social sciences are complicit in enacting the very harms that oppress, police, surveil, detain, displace, and incarcerate Black and Indigenous people of color communities. The harsh reality is that for women of color to succeed in academia today requires securing funds from problematic sources and foundations whose board of trustees or advisory members include the head of corporations or banks that are enacting various forms of violence in our hoods, barrios, fields, and reservations including environmental degradation, displacement, and incarceration.

#### ABUNDANCE AS ALTERNATIVE FUNDING PRAXIS

Although the writing retreat and our junior women of color in political science collective would not have come together without financial support from APSA, we also must envision sustainable alternatives. As social science research becomes increasingly commodified, privatized, and co-opted, we acknowledge the urgent need to seed a new praxis for funding research and collaborations that is rooted in anti-racist and anti-capitalist logics.

We are committed to envisioning new ways to support one another’s research that leaves open the possibility for emancipatory collaboration and radical kinship. As we continue to deepen our work as a collective, we draw inspiration from grassroots and people-powered movement campaigns as sustainable funding alternatives and as a solution to the inadequacies of current funding structures. We manifest abundance and challenge the scarcity mindset that years of chasing papers have left us with and instead we hold close the words of adrienne maree brown: “The society we want to

build, the society we want to structure and move toward, is one in which there’s abundant justice, abundant attention, abundant liberation, where there is enough for all of us to feel attended to.”<sup>8</sup> ■

#### NOTES

1. Quote from Nadia Brown from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 18, 2020.
2. Quote from Maricruz Osorio from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 19, 2020.
3. Quote from Jessica Lavariega Monforti from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 8, 2020.
4. Quote from Nadia Brown from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 18, 2020.
5. Quote from Maricruz Osorio from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 19, 2020.
6. Quote from Melissa Michelson from correspondence with Diane Wong. December 8, 2020.
7. The information gathered about women of color and their funding resources derived from an online search of available curriculum vitae. This list represents a conservative estimate, given that information about funding resources was not listed online for all scholars.
8. From adrienne maree brown’s “two sweet things” blog post on March 28, 2018.

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