Psychology PhDs have skills broadly relevant for teaching, industry, and government. They are integral to producing basic research and evidence-based solutions for policy and industry. Only about half of psychology PhDs are hired in academia, but psychology graduate training in the United States has largely retained the classic graduate training model of a direct path to an academic job. It’s time to change that, says Wendy Wood. The APS President reads her first column published in the APS member magazine, the Observer.

Read Wood’s column in the July/August 2023 APS Observer.

Unedited Transcript

[00:00:09.770] – APS Wendy Wood

I’m Wendy Wood, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Business at the University of Southern California. And I’m president of the association for Psychological Science. This is my latest column for
The Observer, the APS membership magazine. You can learn much more about scientific psychology by visiting the APS website psychologicalscience.org.

[00:00:42.060] – APS Wendy Wood

It’s time we train students for diverse careers in psychological science. A few years ago, I attended a town hall meeting in social and personality psychology. Several graduate students there expressed frustration over what they perceived as the oversupply of PhDs for very few academic positions. They were angry about spending years of working hard toward an academic career that now seemed unattainable. The students were so frustrated that they proposed a solution that others have claimed is obvious shrink doctoral programs by admitting fewer students.

[00:01:27.960] – APS Wendy Wood

But to me, this solution reflects a complete misunderstanding of the challenges facing graduate training. The most basic, of course, is adequate funding. Across the world, students are burdened with debt, and teaching faculty aren’t paid a living wage. But there is another fundamental problem with the nature of psychology graduate training itself, and that is we’re not preparing students for the many careers in psychological science. Psychology PhDs have skills that are broadly relevant for teaching, industry and government.

[00:02:08.280] – APS Wendy Wood

World leaders from India to China to the United States, constantly tout the importance of scientific research for national prosperity, for well being and competitiveness. PhDs are integral to producing basic research and evidence based solutions for policy and industry. The need for broader training models in psychology is evident in the surveys the US. National Science Foundation conducts each year. Of the jobs obtained by doctoral recipients, the percentage of US.

[00:02:46.050] – APS Wendy Wood

Graduates moving directly into academic positions in psychology has declined only slightly since 2000. But this decline is, in a way, offset by the increased number of students taking postdoctoral positions, which are often a route to an academic job. Although academic opportunities have in this way remained sort of stable, the requirements for these positions have increased. One study found that in 2020, successful candidates for psychology faculty positions in Canada had twice the number of publications, as in 2010. This is partly tied to the increase in candidates with postdoctoral experience, which enables productivity of all kinds, including publications.

[00:03:39.700] – APS Wendy Wood

The publication increase also reflects new technologies that can streamline research, such as online data collection, along with a rise in collaborative research groups that publish articles jointly, thereby increasing the productivity that’s attributed to each individual scholar. Given that only about half of psychology PhDs are hired in academia, what do the others do? Well, in 2020, only 14% reported jobs in nonprofits, government or industry, which likely includes selfemployment, perhaps as licensed
Clinicians. The relatively few early career psychologists entering nine academic fields contrast with trends in other sciences. New PhDs in life and health sciences are now employed about as often in industry as they are in academic positions.

Many psychology programs, unfortunately, don’t provide students with career guidance for jobs outside of academia. But regardless, the content of PhD training is readily transferable to a variety of careers, as shown by a survey of recent science PhDs. Scientists holding research intensive jobs such as ones in academia. Government industry research largely reported using the same skills acquired in graduate school as those with research nonintensive jobs, such as teaching science, communication, science, policy and technology. So graduate programs are already providing basic skills relevant to a broad range of careers.

They just aren’t preparing students to apply them outside of academic positions. What the NSF results are telling us is that the variety of positions held by psychologists is not a new development, but psychology. Graduate training in the United States has largely retained the classic graduate training model of a direct path to an academic job. Why do we continue to stick with this classic model? Well, one reason is that some faculty aren’t interested in mentoring students who want a nonacademic career or even a teaching career.

But the reality of the job market is that lots of talented students will get faculty jobs and lots of talented students won’t. I also sometimes hear the claim that adding additional graduate training opportunities such as workshops, internships and courses in applied areas will impede students research. However, programs that provide such additional training have not shown an increase in the time that it takes students to get a degree or a reduction in their research productivity. The best graduate training programs are changing to train psychological scientists for a broad range of careers, and you can see these suggested changes in NIH’s Best program. They don’t leave students to individually take on the challenge of preparing for a nonacademic job after their PhD or postdoc training.

Yet many programs still don’t offer this additional training in nonacademic positions, and students may not have much understanding of the careers open to them. So in my columns this year, I’ll explore not only the interesting topics in our science, but also the role of psychology in nonacademic jobs. I hope to include interviews with leaders in different nonacademic fields who have a vision for how psychological scientists are contributing and can contribute to their organization. But to end this column, it’s helpful to recognize that most early career PhDs in science report being pretty satisfied with their positions. Whether working in research intensive or research nonintensive positions, scientists mean ratings fall between satisfied and very satisfied.
For students, I think this is the most important. A PhD equips you for a satisfying career, whichever path you might choose.