

Careers Up Close: Sarah Townsend on Teaching New Theories of Difference

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Sarah Townsend is an associate professor of management and organization at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. She uses a cultural psychological approach to research the sources of and solutions to inequality.

- **Current role:** Associate professor of management and organization and director of the Culture, Diversity, and Psychophysiology Lab, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, 2013–present
- **Previously:** Postdoctoral fellow, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2011–2013
- **Terminal degree:** PhD in social psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2011
- Recognized as an APS Rising Star in 2016

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Landing the job

The first time I went on the job market, I got an interview somewhere I thought was perfect, and I didn't get the job. I was devastated, but it all worked out. In the end, my first job was as a postdoc at the Kellogg School of Management. It was a great position for many reasons—developing collaborations, building a strong pipeline, and getting additional experience in the classroom. It's a long story, but I thought it would be a good stepping-stone. In that kind of position, you teach a full load, but you also have research funds and some support, so it was exciting.

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Forging your own route to success

Much of the work I was doing when I received the APS Rising Star Award in 2016 was testing a difference-education intervention approach that targets first-generation college students. The idea is that we teach students a new lay theory of social group difference—that differences are malleable and the result of adapting to the situation you grew up in. The goal of the intervention is to show first-generation college students that while they might experience obstacles that are different than those of continuing-generation students, they can use different strategies to be successful.

Since then, I've followed up on long-term outcomes, including whether the effects persist through graduation. I'm also working on a few projects investigating how a contextual theory of group difference can be applied to individuals' understandings of gender and racial differences.

Strengthening strategies

When teaching and mentoring one-on-one, I emphasize that people have different strengths, strategies, and obstacles. Everyone has the ability to be successful, but their routes to success might be different. It's important to acknowledge your particular perspective and experiences and then capitalize on those as much as possible.

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Using your voice

To be honest, I feel very lucky. I'm not going to say that getting to this point in my career was easy; it took a lot of persistence and hard work and dedication, but I had a wonderful, diverse, and supportive set of mentors and collaborators throughout the years. They really helped me stay the course and focus on doing what I needed to do to run studies, write papers, and publish them. As a Black, White, and Okinawan woman, it was invaluable to have them as role models and examples, assuring me that I had what it takes. Now that I have tenure, I'm happy to have the opportunity to mentor others and pay it forward. I also feel the responsibility to use my voice to create inclusive classrooms and a diverse faculty.

Variety at work

I enjoy how varied my work is. Sometimes I'll meet with one student and talk very intensely about how to manipulate a specific construct and get into the nitty-gritty of study design or statistics. And then I will read a paper and have these really high-level discussions about theory in the PhD seminar I teach. The next day I might do an executive education session, helping company leaders to improve their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices and policies. And, at some point, I still squeeze in some writing. Every time in my career when I've begun to feel like I've got this down, something new falls on my plate and I have to figure that out. It's challenging, but it also keeps things dynamic and enjoyable.

Diving into DEI

A lot of the professional education I do is through Marshall's Executive Education program and in industries such as grocery, biotechnology, and banking. I teach sessions on DEI with a focus on providing research-based solutions.

One of my favorite groups to work with is Marshall's Navy SEALs transition group, With Your Shield. They have two cohorts a year of 8 to 10 SEALs. The SEALs will be the first to tell you that they are not very diverse and have not had a lot of experience in diversity-related issue. But, they dive right in and ask a lot of tough questions. I always enjoy hearing their perspectives and getting to share mine, so it's really rewarding.

Going forward

I'm very much interested in continuing to research difference-education and, in particular, examining how a contextual understanding of difference can be leveraged to reduce inequality and increase inclusion not only in college but in the workplace as well. This interest also dovetails with my teaching. In educating people and companies about what they should do, I often stumble on open questions, like: What is the best way frame DEI efforts to employees? I'm excited about what the next chapter of my career will hold.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or post a comment.

Do you know an early-career researcher doing innovative work in industry or academia who might be a good fit for Careers Up Close? Contact the Observer at apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org.