"I Advocate on Behalf of Psychological Science Before the US Congress"

K. Andrew DeSoto

Abstract In our interview with Andy DeSoto, we find out about his path from PhD to policy. Andy works for one of the key psychology scientific organizations and frequently visits Capitol Hill to help the association advocate for federal funding or topics related to psychological science. Speaking and writing skills are essential to this job, and the credentials of a PhD are important for demonstrating expertise. This job allows Andy to not only stay in touch with his academic colleagues but also focus on making a difference on behalf of the field. He reminds us that career paths are often not direct, to seize the opportunities that arise, and to enjoy your time as a PhD student.

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Contents

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Andy: Hello! I'm the Director of Government Relations at the Association for Psychological Science (APS). In this role, I carry out the association's mission by overseeing our connections with the government institutions that support psychological science. I advocate on behalf of psychological science before the US Congress and foster connections with the world's top science funding agencies and programs that support our research area. I also promote the application of psychological science to improve government programs and policies. Day-to-day this means I am often out of the office at meetings where behavioral science is being discussed or talking with research psychologists, program officials, or policymakers about developments in the field. I also spend time in the office researching policy proposals and strategizing and carrying out APS activities, such as issuing statements or sending formal letters. I also oversee APS's efforts to communicate policy developments and funding opportunities to our members. I am fortunate to be the lead psychological scientist on staff in our DC office, which means that I often consult and advise on our scientific initiatives.

What was the focus of your PhD?

My PhD is from Washington University in St. Louis's Department of Psychology. Roddy Roediger was my adviser. I started the program in 2009 and graduated in 2015. For most of my graduate career, I was focused on the relationship between confidence and accuracy in memory reports (see DeSoto & Roediger, 2014, for a representative publication). Near the end of my time in graduate school, I began to work with Roddy on issues of collective memory – how groups as a whole remember events of the past (e.g., Roediger & DeSoto, 2014).

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

As I was finishing my PhD, I was interested in a wide variety of potential career plans and engaged in a very broad search across many areas to try to find a potential career for which I'd be a good fit. The DC area is home for me, and my future spouse had just moved back to DC for work, so I was very motivated to establish a career in Washington specifically. I had "grown up" as a scientist with APS, so to speak, participating in their student programs and serving on their student leadership board, so I knew the organization very well. I'm grateful to APS Executive Director Emerita Sarah Brookhart for taking a chance on me and offering me a one-year fellowship to work at APS that eventually became my permanent role.[1]

As my PhD program was wrapping up, I explored other opportunities besides work with APS too. I applied for a range of US federal jobs on USAJobs.gov that I now recognize were totally out of my league or lane. I cold-emailed folks at tech startups and had several good conversations with folks doing applied psychological science at different places around the country. At one point, I even had a promising bite from a recruiter at Facebook, which eventually petered out as the APS momentum grew. The slow sense over time was that the stars were aligning for the next step to be toward APS.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

Day-to-day life is varied and a lot of fun. In the office, I spend most of my time in meetings or working on the computer, writing, or on email. But I also spend a lot of time attending local meetings and events. Given that Washington, DC is home to the US federal government, key science funding agencies are just a short Metro (commuter rail) ride away. Capitol Hill is a frequent destination. And DC is home to many think tanks too; for instance, across the street from the APS office are both the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, to name a few.

One reason I like my area of work is because it's relatively fast paced and exciting. I might come into the office and learn about a new bill calling for US federally funded research in a particular area. I might strategize about how APS might craft a response to the bill sponsor encouraging them to integrate behavioral science, or psychological science specifically, into the work. I might then coordinate with my colleagues who oversee our news efforts or publications to ensure that the issue is adequately covered. I may then meet with individuals locally who are familiar with

[1] Be sure to read Brookhart's (2020) *Observer* column for an inspiring look back at APS's origins and trajectory.

the issue or attend a coalition member meeting where multiple folks in my line of work have convened to discuss.

It can be a stressful environment, sometimes, because at many of these meetings you may never know who you'll bump into, what you might be asked to speak about, etc. Eminent experts or sage policy wonks are encountered at every turn. When I began this line of work, most of my mental effort went into wondering whether I was over- or underdressed or which building entrance was the right one to take to get to a meeting. Fortunately, most of my time is now spent thinking about the actual subject matter of the meeting. (Nevertheless, I usually have a spare tie in my bag, just in case!)

For more of a sense of the kinds of things we work on at the APS office, be sure to check out some of my writing in our membership magazine, the *Observer* (e.g., DeSoto, 2021a, b).

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

A PhD has been extremely valuable. First, I find that a PhD education is a useful "advanced liberal arts education" that honed my thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills in a way that my actual liberal arts undergraduate education only started. But more importantly, understanding scientific research, and the research process, enables me to be the most effective advocate for the science of psychology. I have a better understanding of some of the challenges and joys members of my field experience – and if I don't, I'm a connection or two away from someone who does.

I'm happy to say that a PhD is respected too by policymakers and others – it helps when a congressional staffer, for example, knows you have a formal, doctorate-level academic background.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

I think it starts with writing and speaking skills, plus a sense of diplomacy. In this area, you have to have a good sense of what is the right thing to do and say in a wide variety of circumstances. It also takes a bit of a team mentality – a research professor, for instance, gets to oversee their own efforts and has a degree of independence in their work that is rare among other careers. (Or at least that's my view from the outside!) I have to keep APS's different stakeholders in my mind at all times – our members, first and foremost, but also our board of directors, which sets the vision

for our organization; my supervisor at the office, the APS executive director; my colleagues; and more. Working at a membership society also has its unique challenges. I'd never want to publicly criticize an APS member, for example – those are the folks whom we exist to serve!

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Yes! I feel that I can enjoy the best of the academic and non-academic worlds in my current role. Working for a psychology organization that serves the field, I can keep in touch with many colleagues and friends from earlier in my academic career. I still keep up with some small research projects, I review papers and serve on an academic journal editorial board, and I attend conferences in my discipline. I feel like I've been able to maintain the positive momentum of my graduate career in the new role and that everything's been able to build off of itself.

Of course, not everyone in the scientific association world gets to work in their precise field, and I recognize my luck in this and in many other ways. At some point in my career, I may need to step into a workplace with more of a focus on health, or a different area of science, or one that deals with member needs that are different from those of academics. Fortunately, though, in the advocacy world, the abilities you gain in making a persuasive argument and anticipating counter-responses are widely applicable. But I do have a soft spot for psychological science.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

There are trade-offs here, for sure. As mentioned earlier, as part of a team, I have obligations to many different groups of people. Reporting to APS's executive director, I have a boss, and in my workplace (as in most), you have to develop good relationships and understand what work is in your purview and what you must run up the flagpole. Just a day or two ago, I was contacted by a member of the media who wanted to talk about my scientific research. In a situation like this, I must do my due diligence in checking in to ensure I am cleared to speak to the media. Generally, there are no problems when it comes to this sort of thing, but I have to keep in the back of my mind whether my comments might (incorrectly) relay the views of my employer. Another lesson I've learned – slowly – is when to make a comment or weigh in and when to let other professionals do their work. A PhD does

not make you an expert in marketing, or communications, or even scientific publishing!

This mindset also comes into play with social media. Before working at APS, I was a very avid social media early adopter and devotee. Recognizing the potential visibility of my position and how my responses might reflect on APS, I am now much more careful on social media and almost always prefer to retweet or reshare the thoughts of others rather than voice my own opinions on matters. As many times as I might like to wade into a particularly spicy methodological debate, I must think first!

To some people, these limitations may seem like a setback, but they haven't been too bad for me, for the most part. I appreciate having a clear chain of command in my workplace; it's great to learn from knowledgeable, talented supervisors and more senior colleagues; and it's a good rhythm to sometimes lead and sometimes follow. So it's been a fun adjustment for me, but it might not be for others.

What do you like most about your work?

I have the opportunity to attend many meetings and get a chance to hear amazing people speak. Often, when sitting in the audience or otherwise participating in an event on a particularly essential topic – for example, 2021's discussions about racism in society, or how psychological science can contribute to solving COVID-19 – it's exhilarating but makes you panic too. There's so much to do in the world, and psychological science has so much to say about so many societal issues. There are countless initiatives to launch, programs to spin up, workshops to hold, stories to write. I get to feel that excitement on a regular basis, that sense of seeing what science and scientists have to offer. The panic comes because the possibilities are truly endless. And in many cases – such as the racism example provided earlier – scientific and other communities have been tackling these issues for decades or more and have not made necessary progress. The easy, fun part is seeing all the opportunities for action. The hard part is rolling up the sleeves and seeing how you can contribute.

What do you like least about your work?

In policy, although the pace of work is quick, progress can be very slow. I used to think academic publishing was a lengthy process because it can take a few years for a standard research project to go from the idea stage to publication. Advocacy never really ends. Think of the priorities that US Congress has, for instance. Members of Congress are worrying about everything from military infrastructure to regulating social media networks. Given the many competing priorities, huge successes in this world can be small and far between, but the ongoing work is essential. It's possible that some years, only my colleagues and I are speaking to US policymakers

specifically about the value of, say, basic psychological science. Someone needs to be sharing that message. I'm lucky to get to do that.

Another challenge I face is that, especially over the last 4 years, things in Washington have become even more partisan. People are angry – angry with their government, angry with their leaders. And you can understand why this is. But it can be hard to navigate the political system when topics are so raw and sensitive. I am working to understand this dynamic myself, to better understand when a quick, impassioned response to right a wrong is necessary and when a slower, more measured take is best. But there are many opportunities for missteps.

The last challenge – and it's an opportunity too – is that membership societies are in an interesting place now, with more discussions about science and communities forming online. All societies – not just ones in psychology – are grappling with how to serve their members and help their members recognize the value of membership and how to provide that value. What will scientific societies look like in 2030? Is there even a place for them? It's a tough problem to solve and one we're working on almost every day!

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

Privilege and good luck aside – which I recognize is asking a lot – I have three general pieces of advice. One is to think about what you want to do and different ways to get there. Someone who wants to do research may be able to do so in a variety of ways. Same for teaching, public speaking, outreach, and more. Many friends and colleagues of my academic "generation" seem to be making their dreams work for them, although the route they're taking isn't always a straight shot. A second piece of advice comes from a wise phrase I once heard from a faculty member at a Wash U department colloquium – "take what the terrain gives." That is, if opportunities present themselves, even if they are a little different from what you are expecting, it may be worth seizing them. You may find that the day-to-day joy of working in a career where you are appreciated and fairly compensated outweighs the future benefit of what you may see as a "dream job" now. If you have a unique opportunity or leverage, use it! Last … do what you can to enjoy the last few months of your PhD. It is unlikely that you ever again will be surrounded by a group of people who have shared the same academic experience and training as you and who think scientifically in such a similar way. Although we psychological scientists know that hindsight is often rosy, I miss Roddy, my PhD adviser; good friends I made in the program; the collegial, challenging environment; and being over a decade younger just about every day!

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

As the reader knows, a PhD is a considerable investment, and it's not for everyone. But pursuing a PhD is one real way to make at least part of your life a vote for the way of knowing about the world that we call science. There's a sense of accomplishment that comes when you finish your degree – sort of a "Hey, I earned this, and now I have it for good." Although your road may be tough – and the journey is difficult for every individual in ways I can't personally understand – I hope you are proud of your choice to pursue the degree, or not, and I hope that this interview and the others in this compilation help in your thinking and decision-making.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Andy!

Andy would like to acknowledge Kayla Burton and Rebecca Koenig for their helpful comments on the print version of this interview. As no surprise to the reader of this interview, this interview does not reflect the views of APS.

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