
Utah State University Political Science Department Statement of Departmental Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

The teaching and learning philosophy of the Utah State University Political Science Department rests on a shared commitment to the standards and values of our profession—freedom of inquiry, intellectual challenge, and scholarly integrity. We envision teaching as a process that involves far more than imparting information. We aspire for our students to become independent thinkers. We strive to develop analytical skills, research skills, and communication skills in our courses. We view learning as the end result of a partnership. The partnership requires faculty to remain accessible and accountable to students, and, most fundamentally, to be personally engaged in student learning. It requires the students to demonstrate initiative and to accept responsibility for their learning--seeking knowledge, rather than simply expecting to receive it.

As we implement these principles, we do our best to address the interests, needs, and ambitions of our students. Commonly pursuing graduate degrees in law, economics, journalism, and business, as well as political science, our students enter an extremely broad range of competitive and adventuresome careers--from congressional staff positions, to health care industry lobbying, to producing the news on CNN. Many have lived or traveled extensively abroad, and they often emphasize international politics in their undergraduate and graduate studies, eventually going into diplomacy or international trade. World events, as well as elections that transfer power, throw unpredictable twists and turns into their career trajectories.

We prepare our students for demanding professional standards and career situations that neither they nor we can envision fully. To succeed, our students must be highly adaptable and broadly knowledgeable. They must have widely applicable research and analytical skills. They need to be adept as communicators, effective in work relationships with others, and able to navigate complex organizations effectively. Analytical writing receives special emphasis in our program, and is required in virtually every class, even at the most introductory level. Many courses stress theory and deductive logic. Research projects are routine in upper division classes, and a research methods course as well as a senior research seminar are required in the program. In-class presentations and simulations that involve students in complex negotiations with other students occupy an important place in the curriculum.

We have also designed our curriculum to expand the horizons of our students, introducing them to different cultures and values, new forms of comprehension, and divergent intellectual paradigms. We consider the diversity within our program to be one of its foremost strengths. More than half of our faculty teach courses on international politics, with about one-fourth specializing on the U.S., and with the remainder defying categorization. Members of our faculty embrace a wide variety of methodological and philosophical perspectives. Most focus on the empirical analysis of politics, but some have a normative orientation, seeking to comprehend politics as a system of natural law. Several favor self interest analysis closely allied to the discipline of economics; others think this approach leads to excessively pessimistic predictions

about the capabilities of democracies. Some lead students in the study of political philosophers dating back to ancients, others have a largely modern focus. Quantitative analysis and scientific methods are integral to many of our courses, but others are largely historical.

Our teaching and learning philosophy also takes into account our department's role within the larger teaching and learning mission of the university. We consider political science to be an absolutely essential component of a liberal arts education. Three to five hundred students annually satisfy their state mandated U.S. Institutions requirement by taking introductory U.S. Government, and countless others take the course simply because they are interested in the subject or feel a civic responsibility to learn about their government. Hundreds take political science in the context of U.S.U. 1300 or another U.S.U. course. We assign some of our most accomplished teachers to these U.S. Government and U.S.U. courses, aiming to make them accessible without compromising the quality of the learning experience for these students. We also try to attract non majors into our more advanced courses, including those on the graduate level. Non major students bring fresh and novel perspectives into our classes. They enrich the experience of our majors. We believe strongly in interdisciplinary perspectives, and encourage political science students look beyond the boundaries of our discipline, to history, sociology, anthropology, economics, natural resources, English literature, foreign languages, or to any other field of inquiry that sparks their imagination. One recent graduate completed political science and mechanical engineering degrees simultaneously and is now a prominent patent attorney.

The core teaching and learning objectives of the U.S.U. Political Science Department are to expose students to current theories and scholarly literature in the discipline, and to apply the theories and literature in the systematic analysis of political systems and events. But we define our teaching and learning responsibilities far more expansively than this. We strive to develop abstract reasoning and writing skills in students. We try to convey to students our enthusiasm for learning, and our belief in the vitality and significance of our discipline. We work to provoke their curiosity about politics and about the world generally. We try to foster interaction within our classes and among our students, establishing a sense of community within the department. We welcome student inquires and input, and take seriously their evaluations of our teaching efforts. We recognize our responsibility to respect their dignity, and to treat them fairly, honestly, and with a sense of good will.

Utah State University Political Science Department

Teaching and Learning Excellence

Introduction

The Utah State University Political Science Department carries forward a tradition of dedication to undergraduate and graduate education, reflected in our enthusiasm for teaching, rigorous academic standards, and exceptional accessibility to students. We offer a challenging, well rounded, and innovative curriculum, preparing our students for highly competitive law and graduate programs, as well as for careers in public service, diplomacy, mass communications, education, and many other fields.

The Political Science Department serves the entire university with general education courses such as U.S. Government, U.S. Institutions, and Comparative Government, and many others integral to the concept of a liberal arts education. Political Science courses mix traditional and innovative pedagogy. Our students attend lectures, participate in seminars, analyze quantitative data, dissect classics of the literature, confront Socratic questioning, conduct surveys, work in internships, and interact regularly with visiting scholars and political leaders. One of our courses immerses students in an intensely competitive, eight week congressional simulation. Another engages them in real time Internet negotiations over global issues with other students from around the world.

Our M.A. program has recently served as a gateway to Political Science and Economics Ph.D. programs at schools such as U.C.L.A., University of Indiana, University of Illinois, Ohio State University, Boston University, the University of California, San Diego, and Brandeis University. Dr. Patricia Siplon of St. Michaels College began her internationally acclaimed research on AIDS in Africa with her USU Political Science M.A. thesis. Other program graduates work at The Hoover Institution, The American Enterprise Institute, in the US Forest Service, as community college faculty, and in organizations such as Sinapu, a Colorado wildlife advocacy group. Two letters in our Teaching Portfolio supporting documents have been provided by recent graduate students now in political science Ph.D. programs. We hope the letters attest to the quality of our M.A. program.

We have a firmly established departmental culture of support for teaching excellence. We measure teaching excellence in several ways, reward it in tenure, promotion, and salary allocation decisions, and address the possible shortcomings in teaching performance with creative and supportive assistance to faculty. We encourage and facilitate the development of teaching skills in faculty. We involve ourselves personally in student learning, extending our efforts into many out-of-class venues. We also provide students with an array of material and organizational resources to enhance their learning experiences.

A Departmental Culture of Teaching Excellence

The quality of teaching and learning in any department depends most fundamentally on the faculty. We believe our faculty demonstrate an exceptional level of dedication to the teaching mission of Utah State University. A culture of support for teaching excellence in the Political

Science Department predates the experience of most on the current faculty, and it attracted many of the current faculty to the department. Political science professors M. Judd Harmon (1959), and Dan E. Jones (1971) were among the first USU Professor of the Year award winners. Additionally, Professor Milton R. Merrill's superb teaching motivated former students and faculty colleagues to establish the Milton R. Merrill Endowment, the first of its kind at USU

Our current 15 member department includes two recipients of the USU Professor of the Year teaching award, five honored as HASS Teachers of the Year, and three as HASS Advisors of the Year. Since 1983, political science faculty members have been selected *eight* times as HASS Teachers of the Year. Our teaching has also been recognized by a variety of other campus organizations, with, for example, one department member winning the 2002 Gerald R. Sherratt teaching award presented at the Robins Awards, two being selected as USU 2003 Greek Council Faculty of the Year, and Professor Randy Simmons being chosen to deliver the 2003 USU "Last Lecture." Five political science majors will have graduated as either HASS or university valedictorians from 1990 through 2003. We have included a complete list of our more significant teaching, advising, and student awards since 1980 as a supporting document.

In faculty recruitment, we seek applicants who share our belief in the importance of teaching, and we carefully assess their potential effectiveness during the interviewing process by requiring at least two classroom presentations, one in an undergraduate course, and another in a seminar for faculty and graduate students. Our tenure, promotion, and post tenure review standards genuinely put teaching and research on equal footing. Our tenure committees routinely provide teaching assistance to junior faculty, and we also assign teaching mentors to these faculty. A statement prepared by Department Chair Randy Simmons, explaining the evaluation of teaching in promotion and tenure decisions, is included among the supporting documents.

Our faculty is extraordinarily diverse, and we take pride in the intellectual vitality of our department. Tenure track appointees include seven men and six women--from Massachusetts to California, China, Australia, Canada, the Middle East, and the Dominican Republic. Several on the faculty have experience working in government, and many of us travel abroad extensively to conduct research. We operate from an exceptionally broad range of methodological and philosophical perspectives and offer courses in nearly every subfield of our discipline.

Measuring Teaching Performance

Although we recognize shortcomings in student course evaluations as measure of teaching performance, we have concluded that when properly interpreted and complemented with other forms of assessment, these evaluations contain extremely valuable information. We believe strongly that faculty should be accountable to students, and we regard course evaluations as an irreplaceable link in establishing such accountability. We may not agree in every case with what the students have to say in their evaluations of our courses, but we certainly want to consider what they have say, and to respond as best we can. In this sense, evaluations are integral to our ongoing efforts to improve teaching. It has not been our experience that student evaluations lead to dilutions in the rigor of courses. Despite the complaints we sometimes receive, we also find that many students express appreciation for courses that truly challenge them. Thus, we have reinforced our departmental commitment to teaching by conducting standard USU student evaluations in *every one* of our courses for more than 25 years.

In the interpretation of evaluations, we first take into account the size of the class. The smaller the class, the greater the tendency of students to evaluate it favorably. We have also observed that graduate students are a bit more kind in their evaluations than undergraduates, and that certain courses, especially those that are intensively theoretical or quantitative, normally receive somewhat lower evaluations than others.

We believe that our formal student evaluations, as well as our informal reputation among students, compare favorably to those of any department in the university with comparably sized classes and comparable numbers of non majors in courses. We have included all student evaluation summaries from calendar year 2002 in our supporting documents.

We supplement student course evaluations in many ways. We include questions about teaching performance in our annual senior exit interviews and five year “follow-up” surveys of alumni. The results of these interviews and surveys do not diverge sharply from the indications of teaching effectiveness in course evaluations, but they do help round out impressions, and are often most complimentary to the courses perceived to be the most challenging. In addition, members of tenure committees regularly conduct classroom evaluations of non tenured faculty, and such evaluations have also become a part of our post tenure review process. These classroom visits have been especially helpful to faculty seeking insight into ways to improve their teaching.

We also review course syllabi and other materials provided to students in our assessments of teaching. In our view, such materials can reveal much about the conceptual rigor of a class, innovations in teaching methods, the incorporation of current scholarship course content, and, most especially, the commitment of effort by a faculty member. Effort by itself does not necessarily result in teaching excellence, but it does reflect enthusiasm and concern, and these are certainly prerequisites to excellence. Although not requested to do so by the committee, we have submitted an Appendix containing representative course syllabi and other materials together with our Teaching Portfolio.

Supporting Teaching Improvement

The Political Science Department supports teaching improvement through many formal and informal processes. In a supporting document, Department Chair Randy Simmons has explained his central, personal role, and the role of tenure and post tenure review committees, in these processes. We value teaching-oriented publications, and reward them. Two of our faculty have coauthored an extensive study guide for a widely adopted US Government text. Another has published in the leading political science teaching journal, *PS*.

To the greatest extent possible, the Political Science Department has provided travel funding and other support for faculty participation in teaching oriented seminars and conferences. We constantly review and refine our curriculum. Most recently, in response to recommendations of students and alumni, we updated our Prelaw degree into a distinctive, selective Law and Constitutional Studies program, supervised by Professor Anthony Peacock, J.D., Ph.D.

The most significant frontier of departmental teaching improvement in recent years has been the incorporation of technology into our courses. We now offer courses entirely “on-line,” and have

accordingly expanded our independent study offerings. In campus studios, we teach introductory courses and graduate level Masters in Social Science courses televised to centers throughout Utah via USU Extension's satellite system. In the coming year, we expect to present a real time video conference course to students in Singapore. Course web pages, sometimes incorporating Syllabase, are now common in the department, and daily E-mail correspondence with students is the norm for most, if not all, of our faculty.

No recent technological change has had a more profound impact on our discipline than the development of the Internet. The Internet emphatically affirms the power of the First Amendment in our society. Political information, though not always accurate, abounds on web sites. Finding it to be an efficient way to give citizens access to its data banks and policy operations, the government has been quick to adopt the Internet. So too have interest groups, research institutes, and politically oriented periodicals. Undergraduate political science students now rely on the Internet more than print sources.

To assist our students, and to conduct our own research as well, every member of our department has acquired substantial Internet expertise. The primary result has been very substantial gains in the research capabilities of our students. A less fortunate consequence has been the facilitation of plagiarism. In response, the Political Science Department recently acquired Internet plagiarism detection software. Studies indicate that alerting students to the existence, and possible application of such software to questionable work, largely solves the Internet plagiarization problem.

Lastly, our culture of support for teaching excellence forcefully facilitates improvement in innumerable, subtle ways. Not a day passes without the exchange of teaching ideas or the discussion of teaching strategies in the department. It is difficult to capture the importance of these informal processes in words, but we do think the results of the processes are evident in our evaluations and teaching awards.

Resources Available to Students

Perhaps immodestly, we regard ourselves—the faculty—as the most important resource we can make available to students. In our view, our accessibility to students assumes more significance than any other ramification of our commitment to teaching excellence. We delegate virtually none of our teaching to assistants, and even our large introductory courses are structured to encourage regular student interaction with professors. Most of our faculty are available for students in their offices on a daily basis. All do their own advising. Several personally conduct out-of-class review sessions prior to every exam, even in introductory courses. Nearly all regularly participate in student-oriented service activities, advising groups such as the Mortar Board, the College Democrats, and the College Republicans; appearing in campus forums to discuss issues such as the military action against Iraq and the September 11 terrorist attack on the US; volunteering time in the USU Connections program; and taking part in events such as the ASUSU “Stump the Professor” competitions.

One focal point of our efforts to bring our undergraduates together into an intellectual community is our Pi Sigma Alpha honorary, advised by two of our faculty. We require a minimum 3.0 G.P.A. for admission into the honorary, and it currently has 47 members. It

sponsors visiting speakers, campus debates, presentations by faculty, competitions with the History department honorary, and purely social events. We think it may be the most active organization of its type at USU. Since 1999, our Pi Sigma Alpha chapter has won *three* national awards, twice being recognized as one of the three best chapters at a large university, with the third award being for the best faculty advisors nationally. We document these awards and explain more about Pi Sigma Alpha in a supporting document.

We also provide our students with very substantial career preparation resources. One example is our previously mentioned Law and Constitutional Studies program, designed to meet the needs of the many political science undergraduates who enter the graduate study of law and the legal profession. Our expanding USU government internship program places about 25 students annually in the US Congress, Washington D.C. lobbying organizations, Utah State government, and political campaigns. Every year, several political science students use these internships as springboards to political careers. Deanna Tanner Okun, US Federal Trade Commissioner and 2000 USU Alumna of the Year, is one example. Along with dozens of other alumni and friends of the department successful in political careers, Ms. Okun has returned to USU to share the wisdom of her experience with undergraduates in our popular Careers in Government program. A more extensive explanation of the Careers in Government Program appears in a supporting document.

Our endowed Milton R. Merrill program enriches our undergraduate and graduate curriculum in a variety of ways. The program has in recent years brought into our classrooms national political figures such as George Stepanopolous, James Carville, William Bennett, and William Kristol, as well as preeminent scholars such as Dr. Morris P. Fiorina, Dr. Gary C. Jacobsen, and Dr. Elinor Ostrom, past president of the American Political Science Association. We discuss other activities sponsored by the Merrill Program below.

Finally, we provide a number of tangible resources to support student learning. We allocate significant financial assistance to both graduate and undergraduate students. We normally appoint six or seven graduate teaching assistants and award one or two graduate fellowships annually, each at a \$7,000 stipend—in addition to other fellowships that our students often receive. We award 10 undergraduate scholarships each year, funded by our alumni, our faculty, and other donors to the department. We regularly fund travel conference paper presentations by graduate students, and occasionally do this for undergraduates. Grants secured by faculty have sometimes enabled us to underwrite graduate student travel for thesis research, including travel to Costa Rica. Each year, we send one or two undergraduates to present research papers at the US Naval Academy foreign policy symposium, and one or two students to attend a similar seminar at the US Air Force Academy.

The Political Science computer laboratory is always accessible to graduate students, and normally accessible to undergraduates as well. We have converted a small classroom into a Political Science Library that now holds hundreds of books donated by faculty or purchased through the Merrill program, in addition to important Political Science periodicals such as *National Journal*. And with assistance from other departments, we make available to students Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research data sets, which include the best known and most comprehensive political science surveys used by scholars.

Student Engagement in Discovery

Research is integral to our curriculum. The capstone of our undergraduate curriculum is a senior seminar limited to 15 students. In these seminars, students complete independent research projects, not unlike senior theses. Normally, these projects are closely related to the ongoing research of the professor leading the seminar. Fall 2002, students in Professor Randy Simmons' seminar completed a substantial part of the research needed to produce a new edition of his highly praised book, *Beyond Politics*. One undergraduate will receive credit as a coauthor of one book chapter.

Our Milton R. Merrill program also supports opportunities to involve students directly in our research endeavors, and the endeavors of visiting scholars as well. Fall 2002, the Merrill program sponsored Professor Peter Galderisi's "Redistricting in the New Millennium" lecture series, with a guest faculty comprised of the nation's leading experts on the subject, such as Dr. Bruce Cain. Undergraduate and graduate students participated in a seminar offered concurrently with the lecture series, and the students conducted independent research projects extending the previous work of the visiting scholars. Two M.A. theses will emerge from this research. Additionally, Professor Galderisi will edit the visiting scholar's presentations, together with his own work on the subject, into a book.