

Curriculum Theory and the Undergraduate Political Science Major: Toward a Contingency Approach

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There is a variety of curricular models for organizing the undergraduate political science major (McClellan 2015). Among them are the traditional distribution model, which exposes students to various subfields in the discipline, and the sequenced-learning framework recommended by the Wahlke Report (Wahlke 1991). Other pathways include civic-engagement education, a recent area of emphasis in the discipline (Matto et al. 2017).

Embedded in these and other course arrangements are theories of how students learn and what a curriculum is, its purpose, and its pedagogy. The analysis in this article applies curriculum theory to current and potential models of the political science curriculum, describing the strengths and limits of each structure as a platform for promoting intended learning. The findings suggest that the future political science major should not be a “one-size-fits-all” framework but rather a choice from curricula that best address different learning goals.

INTRODUCTION TO CURRICULUM THEORY

Curriculum theory in the United States is the “interdisciplinary study of curriculum in its historical, political, racial, gendered, postmodern, autobiographical, religious, and international dimensions” (Pinar 2010). For much of the twentieth century, the field was occupied by practitioners seeking to determine what should be taught in schools and how best to teach it. Beginning in the 1960s, a “reconceptualization” movement sought to understand curriculum in historical, political, and social contexts, leading to the organization of a separate branch of theorists pursuing “curriculum studies” (Pinar 2010).

The reconceptualists took a critical stance toward the technical-rational paradigm of curriculum development, in which schools translated educational purposes into behavioral objectives and then organized activities designed to achieve those objectives (Tyler 1949/2013). This approach, detractors said, treated education as managerial routine subject to control by political authorities. Early on, critics focused on how curriculum served the demands of neoliberal capitalism. Later, the movement turned toward postmodern analysis, emphasizing the subjective dimensions of educational experience, both individually and from the perspectives of cultural, ethnic, gender, and identity groups (Pinar 2010).

The present state of curriculum theory is highly pluralistic in terms of subject and approach. The original question of curriculum development (i.e., “What knowledge is of most worth?”) became more inclusive: “What is worth knowing, needing, experiencing, doing, being, becoming, overcoming, sharing, contributing, and more?” (Schubert 2010). Analysis expanded to include alternative perspectives, such as cultural studies, feminist and gender studies, critical race theory, postcolonial studies, narrative inquiry, and internationalization (Kridel 2010). Rational and behavioral approaches to curriculum, aimed at improving practice, were still visible in education-reform efforts—for example, No Child Left Behind (Dee et al. 2010).

DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

The traditional definition of curriculum is, simply, a course of study. Reflecting the diversity of curriculum scholarship, multiple definitions have emerged. As this review of selected approaches suggests, definitions range from institution-centered, intentional, and formal to student-centered, experience-based, and informal. Within each approach, various models operate (Bali 2018; Barnett and Coate 2005; Smith 2000).

The first two approaches define curriculum in top-down terms, centering on formal instruction designed by education professionals and experienced by students in classroom settings, as follows:

- *Curriculum-as-content* refers to the transmission of content or subject knowledge. This approach is associated with the idea that there is a canon of knowledge that all who engage in a discipline must learn.
- Influenced by scientific management theory of the early twentieth century and the thinking of educator Ralph Tyler (1949/2013), *curriculum-as-product* involves (1) determining the learning, in terms of knowledge, skills, and predispositions, that students need to succeed in the world; (2) selecting and organizing content and learning experiences to achieve specified outcomes; and (3) determining how to evaluate the extent of desired change in student behavior that has taken place.

The following approaches see curriculum as emerging from the interaction of educators and learners and as occurring in informal as well as formal settings. The latter two frameworks

draw attention to the context of educational experiences, as follows:

- *Curriculum-as-process* points to interactions among teachers, students, and source material—that is, what actually happens in the setting in which learning is taking place. This approach, following the ideas of John Dewey (1916/1997), views the classroom as a laboratory in which ideas are tested and knowledge is constructed by teachers and students.
- *Curriculum-as-praxis* directs the process of teaching and learning toward shared understanding of problems affecting the human condition and plans for action. This approach uses critical pedagogies (Brookfield 2005), placing educational institutions at the forefront of social change.
- The *hidden curriculum* refers to the values or messages conveyed to students by the larger context or institutional structure in which educational activities occur. These informal lessons might include sitting quietly and taking turns. To those taking a critical stance, such as Friere (1968/2000), the hidden curriculum reinforces social inequality.

In a sense, the evolution of curriculum theory resembles the intellectual development of political science (Katznelson and Milner 2002). Conflict continues between practitioners and scholars about the relevance of the discipline. Varying ideas about ontology and epistemology yielded different frameworks of inquiry (Lowndes, Marsh, and Stoker 2018). What is worthwhile for students to know and do and toward what ends remain central questions for curriculum scholars and political science educators.

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CURRICULUM APPROACHES AND HOW THEY INFORM MODELS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR

By applying curriculum theory to models of the political science major, we can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of each model as a vehicle for student learning in the discipline.

Curriculum-as-Content: The Distribution Model

Political science education begins with the knowledge that political scientists believe is worthwhile for students to learn. Still the dominant approach to the major (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019), the *distribution model* comes closest to the *curriculum-as-content* theory. Typically, departments require a series of courses that introduce students to key subfields of the discipline, including American government, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory. Survey courses introduce students to basic facts, concepts, theories, insights, great works, and influential thinkers in each subfield.

Coverage of subfields ensures breadth of study; however, political science faculty may have more goals in mind than transmitting information. For example, content may serve as a vehicle for developing critical-analysis skills. Additionally, scaffolding of distribution requirements can promote in-depth learning because an introductory course can serve as a prerequisite for upper-level courses in the same subfield.

Nevertheless, faculty should be aware of tradeoffs when content knowledge is the priority. A heavily prescribed curriculum may not provide students with opportunities to develop creative skills, discover new knowledge, integrate learning, or learn more about themselves. Similarly, civic and political-engagement activities may be deemphasized.

Furthermore, the content model privileges those who choose the content. Any group of political scientists likely will disagree about which subfields should be emphasized, the direction of inquiry, and methods of investigation. Students may be unaware of the reasons why content is included or excluded and the hidden values that underlie those decisions. Perhaps most important, a content-rich curriculum may not give students much direction over the purpose of political learning (Bali 2018).

Curriculum-as-Product: The Sequential-Learning and Outcomes Models

Understood as a response to loosely organized distribution requirements found in many political science programs, the Wahlke Report emphasized curricular coherence and in-depth learning (Wahlke 1991). The report stated that the undergraduate major should focus on the development of liberal learning skills—such as critical and analytical thinking, researching, writing, and oral expression—to produce politically literate college graduates.

The Wahlke committee also recommended sequential and topical organization of the political science curriculum. In addition to requiring a common introductory course, a scope and methods class early in the program, and a senior capstone course or experience, departments should arrange their curricula in a manner that incorporates comparative and diverse perspectives and leads to greater understanding, imagination, and synthesis (Wahlke 1991).

Under this formulation, content is a means to the end of skill development, not an end in itself. Thus, the sequential-learning framework suggested by the Wahlke Report fits the *curriculum-as-product* approach. Measuring the success of the learning program is based on student demonstrations of knowledge and skills. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between a sequential structure and student learning in political science (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003).

Adopted by a minority of political science programs (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019), the Wahlke framework was superseded by the *outcomes model* (McClellan 2016). This involves

identifying what graduates should know and be able to do, articulating where in the educational program this learning should take place, measuring the extent to which students are achieving desired learning, and using the results of assessment to improve curriculum and instruction.

Compared to the Wahlke proposals, the outcomes model furnishes departments with greater flexibility regarding the choice of student-learning outcomes. Furthermore, the approach allows for various curricular arrangements, as well as forms of technology-aided learning, including massive open online courses, mastery-learning modules, and “flipped” classrooms.

Conversely, as with the content model, the choice of outcomes usually takes place independent of the involvement of learners. Strict adherence to teaching curriculum standards could disempower instructors as well. Valuable insights that arise from the interaction of faculty, students, and source material do not always correspond to the objectives of the lesson plan (Smith 2000).

Curriculum-as-Process: High-Impact Practices and Civic Engagement

The student-engagement approach asserts that participatory teaching experiences, or “high-impact practices” (HIPs), can promote “deeper” learning.¹ As opposed to rote memorization, deep-level processing reveals a longer-term commitment to understanding the meaning of information, including integration and synthesis with prior learning, seeing things from different perspectives, and application to real-world situations (Kuh 2008).

Within political science, rising interest in *civic and political engagement* framed the discussion of HIPs (McCartney, Benning, and Simpson 2013). Active-learning exercises such as simulations and problem-based learning are used, along with service-learning projects and internships, to promote civic education and involvement.

The more that political science departments emphasize engaging teaching and learning experiences in and out of the classroom, the more the undergraduate curriculum reflects the *curriculum-as-process* approach. The strength of this model

Furthermore, they state that active- and collaborative-learning activities may make classes lively and interesting but not necessarily demanding and challenging.

Indeed, there is less assurance in process models that desired content will be covered or outcomes achieved. There likely is considerable variation from class to class, depending on the skill of the professor and the particular configuration of learners. As for experiential learning, student-engagement scholars Kuh and Kinzie (2018) admitted that HIP experiences can be uneven.

Curriculum-as-Praxis: Critical Analysis and the Hidden Curriculum

Although curriculum-as-process models are more student-centered and liberating for instructors, the approach makes no explicit statement about the values and interests that the educational process serves. *Curriculum-as-praxis* frameworks bring these issues to the forefront and raise awareness of the contexts in which student interactions take place (Smith 2000).

The goal of this approach is informed and committed action to effect social change. Through dynamic exchange and reflection between teachers and learners, the curriculum evolves. Participants observe power differentials at not only the macro level but also in institutions of higher learning. For political science, therefore, classes and courses become laboratories for applied knowledge, understanding, and engagement.

Associated with curriculum-as-praxis, the *hidden curriculum* refers to what students learn from the way the school operates rather than through the formal education program (Friere 1968/2000). From a neo-Marxist perspective, the regimentation of elementary and secondary schools prepares young people for capitalist production. Rather than promote social mobility, neoliberal education is a process of social reproduction (Barnett and Coate 2005).

Analysis of power and status in higher education may proceed from not only social class but also culture, race, and gender standpoints. For instance, prior academic preparation and family socioeconomic status are strong predictors of college persistence and achievement, thereby reinforcing

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is that it captures the messiness and unpredictability of the learning process. Active-teaching and -learning activities develop skills in critical thinking, listening, creativity, and teamwork. Content and outcomes provide broad parameters for action because students learn by doing (Dewey 1916/1997). Instructors and practitioners treat knowledge as tentative and open to scrutiny.

However, some scholars claim that the purported benefits of HIPs in and out of the classroom are exaggerated. Arum and Roksa (2011) remarked that out-of-class activities, no matter how engaging, distract students from needed study time.

inequality (Arum and Roksa 2011). First-generation and African American students lag in access to HIPs (Kuh 2008). Research indicates that a hidden curriculum amplifies gender inequality in political participation, public policy, and involvement in the profession (Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012).

Political science could play a central role in deconstructing the hidden curriculum by using critical pedagogies (Brookfield 2005); identifying centers of power and inequality in higher education; exposing students to strategies of political influence; and modeling democracy and inclusivity in departmental practices, faculty–student relations, and classroom conduct.

Praxis models conflict with the idea of value-free social science, which can make more than a few political scientists uncomfortable. However, departments and institutions with values-based missions may gravitate toward this approach. Given the increased diversity of the student population and greater student interest in politics, more programs may respond similarly.

DISCUSSION

The purposes of this analysis are to describe some of the curricular models used in political science and, through the application of curriculum theory and approaches, unpack the assumptions that each model holds about what students should learn and how.

It should be clear that there is no one best way to organize the major. Rather, the choice of curriculum is contingent on which goals the political science major should pursue.

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Political scientists have always disagreed about whether political science education should promote social science, citizenship, or specific careers in public service (Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006). Marineau (2020) provides a way to connect undergraduate curricular models to student goals and the skills they need to succeed.

First, to be *researchers*, students need to know how to write high-quality research papers (Marineau 2020). Toward this end, the curriculum should prepare them for graduate education in political science or related fields, featuring quantitative and methods training and reporting on up-to-date findings in the field. The content model and liberal learning approach recommended by the Wahlke Report appear most suited for achieving this goal.

Second, civic education is most appropriate for students who want to become *activists*. Movements within the discipline for civic and political engagement (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013) and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Craig 2014) reflect greater interest among political science faculty in the process framework. To the extent that activists are exploring alternative ideologies and models for social change, the praxis and hidden curriculum approaches are appropriate.

The third goal of the political science major is *leadership*, according to Marineau (2020). This is likely to be the first choice of most students because few graduates in the discipline go on to graduate school in political science or become professional political operatives. Education for leadership might include learning outcomes such as career-preparation skills, professional ethics, and skills in conflict resolution (Marineau 2020). In addition, programs would include internships and other high-impact practices that provide opportunities for leadership development.

In any case, the curricular models presented in this study are distinct but not mutually exclusive. For example, a department might decide that students should understand the meaning and importance of democratic government in an era of “democratic setbacks and popular protest” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020). In all likelihood, tackling this subject would require multiple curriculum approaches. A curriculum dedicated to reimagining and reshaping democracy would involve immersion in democratic theory and practice (content), development of critical-thinking and democratic-action skills (outcomes and process), and awareness of how political structure and behavior reflect power differentials (praxis and hidden curriculum).

The goals and curricula that individual departments choose will depend on institutional and departmental missions, interests of political science faculty, and composition and aspirations of students. Understanding the different types of

curricula and their aims should inform discussion about how to rethink undergraduate political science education. ■

NOTE

1. HIPs include first-year seminars, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative classroom activities, study abroad, undergraduate research, community-based learning, internships, e-portfolios, and capstone courses (Kuh 2008).

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