Rethinking the Undergraduate Political Science Major

Rethinking the Undergraduate Political Science Major: An Introduction to the Symposium

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As social unrest and a global pandemic continue to wreak havoc across the globe, the term "challenging times" has assumed new meaning. Faculty and students, including our undergraduate and graduate students, have experienced the consequences acutely and directly. As faculty and administrators reacted to unfolding events by suddenly shifting courses to online formats, students were sent home to study in relative isolation. Faculty colleagues were separated from one another, making it difficult to interact as colleagues. Academic conferences have been delivered virtually or canceled altogether, depriving scholars of the ability to exchange ideas face to face, a critical part of what we do. The COVID-19 virus spares no one and does not discriminate among subfields, epistemologies, or institutional types.

Times like these cause us to rethink almost everything about our discipline: how we run our conferences, how we interact as colleagues, how we influence policy makers, how we publish and make our research consumable to a broader public, and—most important—how we teach. The teaching of political science is more important now than ever before, not least of which because we teach skills that produce leaders. Our students know (or should know) how to diagnose and analyze a problem; how to come up with plans, based on evidence, to solve problems; how to mobilize support for their initiatives and actions; and how to use ethical insights to guide the use of power to achieve desired ends. These skills are needed now at all levels of society, not only in government but also in the private sector, nonprofit sector, and civil society. Thus, the teaching of political science is needed now more than ever.

How do we do this virtually and online? How do we teach students the skills that are central to our discipline? How do we promote civic and political engagement in the age of remote education? How do we promote tolerance and respect for diversity while online, a space in which human interaction is conditioned heavily by differential access to technology?

There are, of course, myriad challenges to the development of these skills that are not completely addressed in this symposium. These articles were completed prior to major events and resulting effects of the past eight months. However, the articles in this symposium speak to enduring skills that political science has sought to convey to students ever since the 1991 "Wahlke Report." This symposium explores the ways in which we can rethink the undergraduate political science major (UPSM) to be better able to impart these critical skills in this "new normal"—and beyond.

The last major American Political Science Association (APSA)–sponsored curriculum reform effort regarding the UPSM took form in the publication of "Liberal Learning and the Political Science Major: A Report to the Profession," shortened to the "Wahlke Report" in honor of John Wahlke, who chaired the task force (Wahlke 1991). The task force promoted a vision of both liberal education and the political science major that emphasized the structure and sequencing of courses to better promote the development of critical thinking and other important transferable skills.[1] The report represents a landmark for the discipline and APSA, one that bears revisiting 30 years later.

Today, the discipline faces many new challenges that did not exist in 1991, including declining enrollments, changes in the demographic composition of incoming students, and demands for the development of "employable skills"[2] at the undergraduate level in the "new normal" in a post–COVID-19 pandemic society.

However, new opportunities exist as well. The rise in mass political engagement—exemplified by the "Black Lives Matter," "#MeToo," and "March for Our Lives" movements—suggests an increasing interest in politics. Although it was a major step in providing association-wide guidance on the structure of the political science major, the Wahlke Report is, in our view, dated. It is time for APSA to consider revised recommendations regarding the UPSM structure.

This symposium represents a step toward reconsidering the recommendations of the Wahlke Report about how to structure the UPSM. Given the challenges and opportunities currently facing political science undergraduate education, the time is suitable for such a reconsideration.

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CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING THE POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR

The UPSM in the United States confronts several challenges. First, the number of students has declined markedly. Overall, based on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in political science from 2011 to 2016 declined significantly. During that period, the total number of undergraduate degrees awarded in the field decreased from approximately 40,000 per year in 2011–2012 to approximately 34,000 per year in 2015–2016. Furthermore, currently only 1.77% of all bachelor's degrees awarded are in political science—the lowest level ever recorded (American Political Science Association 2017). In comparison, the field of economics experienced growth in degrees conferred and currently is close to equaling the political science field in the total number of undergraduate degrees awarded.

In addition to the overall downward trend in enrollments, the mix of institutions that award the most undergraduate political science degrees has shifted. According to the "2016–2017 APSA Departmental Survey: Degrees Awarded Report," political science programs at public universities—particularly among PhD-granting departments, which are generally at larger universities—experienced an increase in the average number of bachelor's degrees conferred between 2014 and 2015 and between 2016 and 2017 (American Political Science Association 2018). Thus, although enrollments in undergraduate programs have declined overall, the decreases have been accompanied by a shift in *where* those degrees are awarded—that is, in the direction of larger public universities. These universities tend to offer extremely large class sizes at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, public institutions increasingly are relying on distance- and online-learning platforms to deliver content, even apart from the pandemic. As conveyed by *US News and World Report*, which cites a 2016 study by the Babson survey group, public colleges and universities experienced the largest growth (7.3%) in online course enrollment between fall 2015 and 2016 (Friedman 2018). Additionally, the report found that roughly two thirds of all online students enroll in programs at public institutions. It is likely that this trend will continue in the future and may be accelerated by the pandemic. The move toward larger class sizes and greater emphasis on "distance" learning represent important challenges to the traditional liberal model of education.

The student population also is changing. As McClellan (2015) noted, current curricular models in political science assume a traditional 18- to 24-years-old, residential, university student population. However, many studies suggest that higher education enrollment will continue to change dramatically in the coming years. The student body will be more racially and ethnically diverse, predominantly female, and less likely to consist of 18-year-olds who are recent high school graduates. The NCES estimates that by 2025, women will outnumber men in enrollment 11.3 million to 8.4 million. Moreover, by 2023, it is estimated that African American and Hispanic/Latinx undergraduate enrollments will increase to 25% and 34%, respectively. Significantly more older students will populate institutions, with increases expected in both the 25–34 and the 35-and-older cohorts by 2025, as well as in the proportion of the student population that is first-generation and nontraditional students. In summary, many institutional and curricular models reflect the assumption that major cohorts would be composed of majority white, middle-class, young people in a full-time residential setting. This is no longer the case.

A third challenge is the rising demand from various "stakeholders" in higher education that greater emphasis be placed on developing employable skills at the undergraduate level. Although this is evident in the sets of practical skills obtained in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, other types of skills associated with liberal education have regained the spotlight. Although political science traditionally has embraced some of these competencies, those associated with career preparation are largely absent from many programs. Incoming students are noticing the gaps and demanding the development of competencies beyond those traditionally emphasized in political science programs.

In addition to these challenges, support for reforming the political science curriculum *within* the discipline continues to gain momentum. The assessment movement has refocused greater attention on learning objectives in the undergraduate curriculum. In addition, political science has rediscovered civic and political engagement as one of those curricular goals. With the rise of the service-learning movement in the 1990s, colleges and universities now recognize the need for "quality civic education to foster the redevelopment of a knowledgeable, capable, and informed citizenry" (Matto

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PRIOR DISCIPLINARY EFFORTS AT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

As Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez (2006) noted, attention to the undergraduate political science curriculum has long occupied the attention of APSA. In the early period, from the 1900s to the 1930s, the focus was largely on designing a major that focused on understanding political institutions, with a secondary goal of preparing students for public service. In the 1950s, departments stepped away from descriptive and practical approaches to promote critical thinking, communication, and analytical skills embedded in liberal education. Another major shift occurred after the issuance of a 1987–1988 APSA departmental survey report on the undergraduate curriculum. It suggested that the predominant model to organize the undergraduate curriculum was a loosely organized collection of distribution requirements, as well as "faddish" electives that had more to do with faculty interests than student learning. At about the same time, the Association of American Colleges (AAC)—which had become increasingly critical of loosely organized majors—called on disciplinary associations to formulate recommendations to "strengthen study-in-depth" (Association of American Colleges 1990). In response, APSA appointed a task force with John Wahlke from the University of Arizona as chair.[3]

Building on the AAC's view that depth of understanding cannot be reached "merely by cumulative exposure to more and more subject matter," the task force set out to design a model that featured sequential learning: "building on blocks of knowledge that lead to more sophisticated understanding…leaps of imagination…and efforts at synthesis" (Association of American Colleges 1990, 131; McClellan 2015). Responding to the 1987–1988 APSA survey results, the Wahlke task force strongly criticized what it viewed as common practice in political science to structure majors in a "disparate and unstructured" way. It argued that this tended to reflect not the promotion of student college graduates, whatever their career plans or other interests" (Association of American Colleges 1990, 134). The intent of the task force was *not* to create a model curriculum but rather to suggest guidelines for undergraduate political science programs to promote liberal education. To that end, the report (Wahlke 1991) recommended the following structure for an undergraduate program:

- a common introductory course (ideally, introduction to politics, but also introduction to American government taught in comparative context)
- a capstone experience in the senior year, such as a senior seminar or research project, that would give students the opportunity to integrate and synthesize prior learning
- a scope and methods course that would expose students to methods of inquiry, both normative and empirical

The report did not recommend specific subfields or distributional requirements for a major. Rather, it suggested that a common set of core topics be covered in one way or another but that these topics be carefully sequenced to build on—and expand—previously developed skills and competencies. The primary goal was the development of skills, and the task force believed that a structured and sequenced major was key to its achievement.

Several studies have supported these claims. Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama (2001) identified several positive effects of a highly structured and sequenced program at Truman State University, including favorable exit interviews and surveys, insightful portfolios, and normed exam results above the national average. Ishiyama and Hartlaub (2003) compared two differently organized political science programs and found evidence that the more deliberately structured program was better at developing abstract and critical-thinking skills. More generally, Ishiyama (2005a) found in a survey of 32 colleges and universities that compared to less-structured programs, those arranged according to the Wahlke Report guidelines (i.e., more common courses, senior capstone, and early methods course) brought about enhanced learning, as

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"experiences in depth" but rather "bureaucratic conveniences" (Association of American Colleges 1990, 134).

Unlike previous APSA curricular-reform efforts, the Wahlke task force attempted to link curricular integrity directly to liberal learning (McClellan 2015). In particular, the group argued that to best develop critical-thinking, analytical, and communication skills, it was necessary to base majors on a sequential model through which students could build increasingly sophisticated structures of knowledge and intellectual skills. The goal of political science instruction, according to the task force report, would not be to produce "good citizens" or train future public employees but instead to turn "politically interested and concerned students into politically literate measured by political science field test scores. Despite this finding, it also was noted that the Wahlke Report has had a limited impact on the discipline overall. Ishiyama (2005b) found that of 193 Midwestern political science programs, only 18% included the basic elements suggested by the Wahlke Report (i.e., common introductory course, methods course, and capstone experience). Even when considering the minimal recommendation for the adoption of a capstone course or experience, the APSA 2015–2017 Departmental Survey reported that only a little more than half (55%) of programs nationwide had adopted this minimal feature (American Political Science Association 2017). Although perhaps not as impactful as originally intended, the Wahlke Report remains

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the last attempt by APSA to provide guidelines on the UPSM structure.

THE ARTICLES IN THIS SYMPOSIUM

The articles in this symposium address current challenges to implementing the Wahlke Report's recommendations, prompt a reconsideration of those recommendations, and suggest new directions. The first article, "The Political Science Undergraduate Major and Its Future: The Wahlke Report—Revisited" by Steven Rathgeb Smith and Meghan McConaughey, uses APSA survey data as well as data from other sources to survey the political science discipline in terms of current characteristics and general trends. They find that although the Wahlke Report's recommendations about student-learning goals and the development of skills remain profoundly important, current trends counter some of the report's recommendations. In particular, the sequencing of the major and the comprehensiveness of the course offerings remain elusive. They also suggest that there needs to be greater flexibility and more creativity in this era of online education to attract and retain students if the UPSM is to thrive. However, they also point to many positive trends, noting what departments are doing across the country to promote civic engagement and to strengthen the skills that graduates need to meet the challenges of the current job market.

Whereas the first article surveys the challenges currently facing the discipline, the second article, "Whither the Political Science Major? Curricular Design and Program Learning Outcomes at 110 US Colleges and Universities" by Maureen Feeley and Renée Van Vechten, examines how extensively the recommendations made by the Wahlke Report have been adopted by political science programs across the country. Building on earlier work, they find that 15 years after the Ishiyama (2005b) study, little has changed. Only 18.2% of the programs they surveyed included the three basic curricular recommendations made by the Wahlke Report (i.e., broad-based introductory course, methods requirement, plus capstone). They also find that departments at larger institutions (particularly MA- and PhD-granting departments) are significantly less likely to include these elements in their curricula. This is concerning because a majority of students nationally are currently enrolled in those institutions rather than smaller liberal arts institutions, and this population is likely to grow.

The remaining articles address restructuring and redirecting the UPSM and suggest ways to enhance the transition. Fletcher McClellan provides a useful way to reimagine the structure of the UPSM. In "Curriculum Theory and the Undergraduate Political Science Major: Toward a Contingency Approach," he evaluates the strengths and limitations of several curricular models, including the traditional distribution model that exposes students to various subfields in the discipline, the sequenced-learning framework recommended by the Wahlke Report, and civic-engagement education—a recent area of emphasis in the discipline (Matto et al. 2017). He suggests that a framework for a future political science major should not be "one size fits all" but instead designed to best achieve articulated learning goals.

In "Community College and University Partnerships for the Political Science Major," Terry L. Gilmour affirms the necessity of developing partnerships between two- and four-year institutions through integration of effort and generally fostering greater communication between them. Understanding this relationship is significant because of the number of nontraditional and students of color transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions, where their first exposure to political science—although limited—likely occurs.

In "Outside-In Political Science," Nermin Allam, Janice Gallagher, Mara Sidney, and Jyl Josephson make a compelling case for the more direct inclusion of civic-engagement pedagogies into the major. They provide "how to" guidance on the implementation of civic-engagement pedagogies and demonstrate how including civic-engagement activities can improve student learning.

In his contribution, "Examining Senior Seminar and Curricular Reform at an HBCU," Matthew Platt addresses two critical recommendations of the Wahlke Report: the sequencing of courses and the institution of a "capstone course." Focusing on the capstone course at a Historically Black College or University, Platt conducted an analysis of student transcripts and found that students generally did not follow the intended curricular path and that the intended curricular path did not seem to impact the quality of final capstone projects. Instead, student learning was heavily driven by the faculty's commitment to a shared goal of "Black political science" and how individual faculty members defined "good work." The article suggests careful attention to the capstone course as a vital component of the political science major.

Finally, in "A Career-Oriented Political Science Major," Michael T. Rogers argues for the need to consider employability and job-skills development as part of the political science curriculum—items that the Wahlke Report did not directly address. He argues that the discipline offers what students are looking for but that it has a poor record of advertising this fact to them. He advocates a "curriculum-as-job-preparation" approach to structuring a political science curriculum.

Although the articles in this symposium do not offer quick solutions to the challenges identified herein, they help us consider competing paths to educating political science undergraduates. We hope that they inspire readers to rethink and reimagine political science programs for the twenty-first century. ■

NOTES

1. Transferable skills are talents and abilities that will travel/transition beyond degrees—hence, "life experiences."
2. Commonly referred to as "employable skills," "career-readiness," and "job-readiness," these include critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communications, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency, to name only a few.
3. The task force consisted exclusively of representatives from large PhD-granting institutions and small private (and often elite) liberal arts colleges. Notably absent was representation from regional public universities and community colleges.

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