

Whither the Political Science Major? Curricular Design and Program Learning Outcomes at 110 US Colleges and Universities

Maureen Feeley, *University of California, San Diego*

Renée Van Vechten, *University of Redlands*

The American Political Science Association's (APSA) last significant review of undergraduate political science education, the 1991 Wahlke Report, advanced 12 recommendations to strengthen political science programs nationwide. This article focuses on two recommendations that subsequently have been supported by a large body of research: (1) that programs provide for “sequential learning,” and (2) that they engage in a learning outcomes approach to curricular design and assessment (Wahlke 1991, 55–56). Given the growing evidence that these approaches result in stronger learning outcomes for political science majors (Bergbower 2017; Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama 2001; Deardorff, Hamann, and Ishiyama 2009; Hinckley, McGuire, and Danforth 2019; Ishiyama 2005b; Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003), this study examines the extent to which political science programs have incorporated these recommendations nationally.

Although the Wahlke Report did not endorse a model curriculum, a central recommendation was that undergraduate programs incorporate sequential learning to enable students to “utilize and build upon concepts, information, and skills they have learned earlier in other courses...and in each course itself” (Wahlke 1991, 55). This recommendation reinforced a finding by the Association of American Colleges (AAC) that unless students’ knowledge and analytical skills were progressively developed through a structured curriculum, the result would be “shallow learning” (AAC 1985, as cited in Wahlke 1991, 49). Specifically, the report criticized a dominant disciplinary trend of requiring broad exposure to subfield knowledge “for purposes of ‘coverage’ of the whole field of politics and government,” without regard to scaffolding knowledge and skills (Wahlke 1991, 51). Whereas scholars have since suggested that some aspects of sequential learning can be achieved through a subfield approach (McClellan 2015, 11), a central critique of the Wahlke Report was that political science programs collectively presented “a picture of disparate and unstructured practices,” which ultimately undermined student learning (Wahlke 1991, 50).

To address this concern, the Wahlke Report recommended that faculty define their program goals based on institution-

specific “resources, talents, and conceptions” and stressed the importance of creating an integrated program that scaffolds knowledge and progressively builds skills throughout the major to achieve their goals (Wahlke 1991, 56). Scholars and regional accreditation associations have since referred to this as a “learning outcomes” approach and recommend that these goals, or program learning outcomes (PLOs), be kept current and made widely available to students (cf. Kuh and Ikenberry 2018; Young, Cartwright, and Rudy 2014). They found that when PLOs are published, students better understand broader disciplinary objectives; assess their own progress toward them; and more effectively communicate their mastery of knowledge and skills to future internship coordinators, employers, and graduate programs.

Since publication of the Wahlke Report, scholars (Bergbower 2017; Ishiyama 2005a, 2005b; Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006) have operationalized three central elements of sequential learning that the report recommended, as follows:

1. A *general introductory course*, in which students form “an overall grasp of the components, boundaries, methodologies, and major issues of the discipline as a whole” (Wahlke 1991, 55).
2. A *political inquiry (methods) course*, in which students “gain familiarity with the different assumptions, methods, and analytical approaches used by political scientists.”¹
3. A *capstone experience*, requiring seniors to “survey their whole learning experience, to recognize the interconnections among its pieces” (Wahlke 1991, 55).

Although numerous studies have investigated sequential learning as an independent variable, only one (i.e., Ishiyama 2005a) has focused on this aspect of curricular design (as defined by Wahlke) as a dependent variable, and only three have provided comparative analyses of PLOs (Ishiyama 2009; Ishiyama and Breuning 2008; Kelly and Klunk 2003). We extend this research with an analysis of 110 political science departments from a range of US institutions to determine the extent to which these research-supported recommendations

Table 1
Characteristics of Sampled Institutions (N=110)

Characteristics	Carnegie Categories			TOTAL (n)
	PhD-Granting	MA-Granting	BA-Granting	
Public	51.6%	47.5%	11.1%	57.3% (63)
Private	48.4%	52.5%	88.9%	42.7% (47)
Region: West*	19.4%	24.6%	22.2%	22.7% (25)
Region: Midwest*	29.0%	26.2%	16.7%	25.5% (28)
Region: South*	25.8%	24.6%	22.2%	24.5% (27)
Region: North*	25.8%	24.6%	38.9%	27.3% (30)
Average/Median Number of Full-Time Faculty	24.5/20 19.2 StD**	6.5/6 3.7 StD	8.7/7 5.3 StD	11.9/7 13.3 StD
Average Student Population 2017–2018	20,002 13,063=StD	6,848 4,420=StD	1,919 870=StD	9,848 10,181=StD
	N=31	N=61	N=18	N=110

Notes: *Regions as defined by *U.S. News & World Report*. **Standard deviation.

have been incorporated into programs nationally in the nearly 30 years since the Wahlke Report was published.²

DATA AND METHODS

Following Ishiyama (2005a), we used *US News & World Report* (2019) data to construct a stratified random sample of higher education institutions (VanVechten 2021).³ *US News & World Report* collapses the 12 Carnegie Classifications of Higher Education into four groups, of which we examined three: (1) national universities (PhD-granting), (2) regional universities (master’s-granting), and (3) national liberal arts colleges (bachelor’s-granting).⁴ Noting that *US News & World Report* scores do not correspond with departmental rankings, we first selected five top-ranked institutions from each category and—while monitoring for public/private and regional balance—randomly generated five mid-range and five “Tier 2” institutions, for a total of 15 institutions in each category, or 110 institutions total.⁵ We also coded for full-time faculty, student population, and regional accrediting organization (table 1).

Following previous research (cf. Ishiyama 2005a; Young, Cartwright, and Rudy 2014), we reviewed department websites, university catalogues, and available syllabi for information about curricular structure, required courses, and PLOs.⁶ For evidence of a subfield approach, we counted the number of traditional subfields (i.e., American politics, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory) required at lower- and upper-division levels. Based on the Wahlke Report and Ishiyama (2005a), we also coded for the three sequential learning elements described previously. Replicating earlier research, we counted “a general introductory course” if it provided a required common broad introduction to the major. For the “political inquiry/methods” requirement, we counted broad-based courses that addressed research design and multiple methodological approaches, excluding statistics-only courses (Ishiyama 2005a; Wahlke 1991). For the “capstone experience,” we counted required senior seminars that included integrative learning through a major research paper.⁷

Table 2
Required Number of Traditional Subfields* (N=110)

	Percentage (n)
Zero Subfields	0.9% (1)
One Subfield	1.8% (2)
Two Subfields	11.8% (13)
Three Subfields	33.6% (37)
Four Subfields	51.8% (57)

Note: *American politics, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory.

For evidence of a “learning outcomes” approach, we coded for published PLOs,⁸ curricular maps linking PLOs to required courses, and substantive content of PLOs.

RESULTS

Based on program-level and institutional data, we report our findings on current trends in curricular design and patterns among PLOs in political science programs nationally.

Wahlke Elements

According to our sample, emphasis on subfield knowledge remains dominant in undergraduate political science curricula nationally, with slightly more than half (51.8%) of institutions requiring that students take courses in all four traditional subfields, and an overwhelming majority (85.4%) requiring a minimum of three or four subfields (table 2).

We also found evidence that the subfield approach proliferates without respect to sequential learning because we observed no relationship between the number of recommended Wahlke elements for sequential learning and the number of subfields required. In fact, 45.7% (N=43) of

Table 3

Programs with Wahlke Elements (N=110)

Number of Elements	Poli Sci Programs % (n)
At Least One	86.4% (95)
3	18.2% (20)
2	35.5% (39)
1	32.7% (36)
0	13.6% (15)

Table 4

Wahlke Elements in Political Science Programs (N=110)

Elements	Percentage (n)
Is Intro to Political Science Course Required? (yes)	34.5% (38)
Is Methods Course Required? (yes)	55.5% (61)
Is Capstone Required? (yes)	68.2% (75)
Intro to PS Only	4.5% (5)
Methods Only	11.8% (13)
Capstone Only	16.4% (18)
Intro to PS and Methods Only	1.8% (2)
Intro to PS and Capstone Only	10.0% (11)
Methods and Capstone Only	23.6% (26)
All Three Elements: Intro PS + Methods + Capstone	18.2% (20)

programs that require three or four subfields either incorporate none or only one Wahlke element.

Moreover, based on our sample, we found that the sequential approach has had relatively minimal impact on

Additionally, we found that the sequential approach has had relatively minimal impact on undergraduate political science programs, with only 18.2% of institutions including all three recommended elements

undergraduate political science programs, with only 18.2% of institutions including all three recommended elements (table 3). Additionally, we found that 86.4% of institutions require at least one element, the most common of which is a senior capstone experience, required by more than two thirds of departments (68.2%), followed by a broad-based methods requirement (55.5%) and a common introductory course (34.5%) (table 4).

Our most robust finding is that program size, as measured directly by number of department full-time faculty and indirectly by total student population, is negatively correlated with each of the three recommended elements of sequential

learning. Specifically, the greater the number of faculty, the less likely the department is to require its undergraduate majors to take a common introductory course (Pearson correlation = -0.243, $p \leq 0.01$), a methods course (-0.250, $p \leq 0.01$), or a senior capstone course (-0.456, $p \leq 0.001$). Explaining why this is the case requires further study, but we hypothesize that as the number of faculty increases, so do the challenges in reaching consensus on curricular decisions. Another plausible explanation is that as the number of majors increases, so do the logistical challenges of requiring sequenced courses. Because a majority of students nationally are currently enrolled in PhD- and MA-granting institutions (56%) as opposed to smaller liberal arts institutions (only 4%) (Center for Postsecondary Research 2019), they are less likely to experience sequential learning.⁹

Program Learning Outcomes

Given that regional accreditation associations began requesting evidence of student learning in the late 1980s, another surprising finding is that fewer than half of political science departments in our sample (41.8%) publish PLOs either on their website or in their university catalogue, as recommended by research and accreditation associations. We also found that departments posting PLOs were more likely to be accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (California); those accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (Central United States) were least likely to post.

Table 5 compares our analysis of PLOs to that of Ishiyama (2009). Consistent with his findings from more than 10 years ago, we found that discipline-specific knowledge, critical thinking, and methodological and written communication skills are still prioritized—in fact, today they are nearly universally articulated as PLOs. Noticeably less emphasized are civic education, ethics, career development, and cultural competencies. It also is interesting that information literacy was not measured as a goal 10 years ago but is found in almost one third of the PLOs we analyzed, signaling its emerging importance.

Even as political science faculty develop PLOs for their majors, it is not clear whether these goals are well incorporated into curricular design. Only three programs in our sample published curriculum maps, and only one provided evidence of sequential learning across its curriculum. Further research could demonstrate whether and how well PLOs align with curricula and whether sequential learning of any type is deliberately embedded in program structure.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the extent to which two central recommendations of the Wahlke Report—sequential learning and a

Table 5
Program Learning Outcomes

	% Included (N=46)	% Reported in Ishiyama (2009) (N=70)
Knowledge of Political Institutions, Processes	95.7 (44)	63.8
Critical Thinking	95.7 (44)	68.1
Knowledge of Theories	78.3 (36)	65.2
Knowledge of Poli Sci Subfields	78.3 (36)	66.7
Methods or Research Skills	69.6 (32)	62.3
Written Communication Skills	69.6 (32)	66.7
Oral Communication/Presentation Skills	43.5 (20)	53.6
Citizenship or Civic Skills	34.8 (16)	24.6
Information Literacy	30.4 (14)	(not asked)
Ethics/Values	28.3 (13)	11.6
Career/Professional Development	26.1 (12)	23.2
Cultural Diversity or Dimensions	17.4 (8)	17.4

learning outcomes approach to curricular design—have been incorporated into political science programs nationally. We found that only 18.2% of programs surveyed included all three

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elements of sequential learning recommended by Wahlke (i.e., broad-based introductory course, methods requirement, and senior capstone) and that department size, measured either indirectly by student population or directly by full-time faculty, is negatively correlated with each element at statistically significant levels. It is significant that most undergraduate political science majors are unlikely to experience sequential learning, due to the fact that a majority of them are currently enrolled in PhD- and MA-granting institutions as opposed to smaller liberal arts institutions.

We also found that only 41.8% of departments publish PLOs, despite research and accreditors' recommendations to the contrary. Substantively, we found that there is discipline-wide consensus about the primacy of subfield knowledge, critical thinking, and methodological skills, as well as knowledge integration through senior capstone experiences. Beyond this, the major is defined more by programmatic diversity than consensus about what it "should" achieve. Even as departments revise curricula according to their institutional

strengths and constraints, it remains unclear how many programs are structured deliberately to achieve defined learning outcomes.

Considering these findings, we recommend that future research more broadly and deeply examine the relationship among sequenced learning, learning outcomes approaches, and student achievement. Much of this work could be done by departments, perhaps with the support of APSA to define, operationalize, and assess PLOs. In fact, the final recommendation of the Wahlke Report was that "the American Political Science Association, through its Education Division, should sponsor and seek support for a study of ways to make reliable and valid evaluations of program performance" (Wahlke 1991, 57). As departments come under increasing pressure to produce evidence of student learning by regional accreditors and state legislatures, they risk these processes being driven by these external actors rather than their own faculty.

We ultimately find that the questions raised by the Wahlke Report nearly three decades ago remain relevant: What are our goals as a discipline for our undergraduates to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed as twenty-first-century thinkers, problem solvers, and citizens? To quote Wahlke (1991, 58): "We are therefore convinced that reexamination and reassessment of the political science major must become a major concern of faculty members, departments, and the discipline collectively.... No problem in political science education deserves more dedicated, long-term, concentrated attention than that of maximizing the level and reach of political literacy in tomorrow's political generation."

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication materials are available on Harvard Dataverse at doi: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7HRZOW>. ■

NOTES

1. They emphasized: "[i]t is particularly important that [students] become familiar with the problems of normative inquiry as well as those of empirical analysis and learn to combine the two appropriately (e.g., in analysis of political value issues in public policy conflicts)" (Wahlke 1991, 52).
2. For an extended analysis, see Feeley and Van Vechten (2019).
3. *US News & World Report* data and methods. www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings.
4. A fourth category, "regional colleges" (which grant less than 50% of their degrees in liberal arts disciplines), is not relevant to this study.
5. We stratified our sample for each of the seven categories using a random number generator, with the exception of the top five in each. In some cases, multiple institutions were tied in the top five, bringing our total case studies to 110. "Tier 2" refers to institutions ranked at the lowest end of each *US News & World Report* category.
6. Because websites and catalogues may not be current, we plan a follow-up study that will include departmental interviews.

7. We adopted Ishiyama's (2005a) operationalization; however, the Wahlke Report explains that the "capstone experience" can take multiple forms, as long as these involve an "integrative effort" (Wahlke 1991, 55).
8. As recommended by research and as implied by Wahlke (1991).
9. As the Center for Postsecondary Research (2019) noted, associate's colleges enrolled 29% and BA/associate's colleges enrolled another 6%.

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