

# A Career-Oriented Approach to Structuring the Political Science Major

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Higher education is at a crossroads (Blumenstyk 2015; DeMillo 2013). Students face unfathomable debt (Mitchell 2019; Tatham 2019), the liberal arts are under siege (Caplan 2018; Dutt-Ballerstadt 2019), and there is a growing number of less expensive educational alternatives to a university education (Craig 2018; Schroeder 2019). Compounding this is the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which has amplified budget shortfalls and declining student enrollments, forcing higher-education institutions to lay off and/or furlough staff and faculty (Bauman 2020; Nietzel 2020). Colleges and universities are rethinking their *modus operandi*. Academic disciplines, particularly those in the liberal arts, should as well.

Yet, it has been three decades since the American Political Science Association (APSA) commissioned guidelines for the political science major (Wahlke 1991). APSA recognizes that the discipline needs updated guidelines; it sponsored a conference on the topic in June 2019. Why now? The 2000s experienced record highs in political science degrees awarded, eclipsing 40,000 per year multiple times. In contrast, numbers in the past five years have fallen dramatically by more than 5,000 or approximately 12.5% (Jackson 2018). Historically, degrees awarded have followed a cyclical pattern; numbers could rebound. However, higher education did not face such dire challenges in the past. Exploring ways that the discipline can attract new (probably minority, likely Hispanic) political science majors is imperative (Fraga et al. 2011).

## DISCIPLINARY RESOURCES FOR RETHINKING THE MAJOR

At the June 2019 APSA conference, Executive Director Steven Smith opened with a state-of-the-major address. After noting the decline in degrees conferred, he presented programs—University of California—San Diego, Stanford, Duke, University of California—Los Angeles, Illinois, and San Jose State—that revised the major. The reasons that each institution made revisions varied: some reacted to weak enrollments (e.g., Stanford) and others proactively integrated best practices (e.g., San Jose State and Illinois). This encourages us to ponder how many programs face revising the major. As of 2017, more than 7,400 colleges and universities offer the political science major (DataUSA 2019). Given state regulations, accrediting-body requirements, and good educational practice, a program likely reevaluates its major one or two times in a decade. Program reevaluation need not mean revision; however, a reasonable estimate is that several hundred to a thousand or more programs revise the major in a decade.

Despite this scale, political science lacks an empirical study of how programs conduct major reform. What reasons drive a revision? What resources do programs need? Where do they look for them? Absent such a study, the best action is to explore the discipline-specific resources that exist for programs contemplating a revision of the major. Surprisingly, APSA's website lacks a webpage dedicated to resources and/or advice on reforming the major. It commissioned the primary disciplinary resource, the Wahlke Report and, after 30 years, its guidelines still lay a good foundation—that is, an introductory course or courses (preferably of a comparative nature), course scaffolding, and a senior capstone experience (Wahlke 1991, 48–60). Nevertheless, many political scientists are unaware that it exists and its disciplinary impact remains limited (Ishiyama 2005, 71–75). The APSA website does not promote it. The Wahlke Report was produced at a favorable time for higher education and during the dawn of online collegiate instruction. It foresaw none of today's challenges and provides no discussion of online education. Programs need help and resources to explain the diverse educational benefits of political science, which skills it develops, which careers its majors pursue and excel at, guidance on developing student-learning outcomes, examples of the diverse ways to structure the curriculum, and advice on assessing programs. The Wahlke Report addresses only some of these areas, such as what the degree offers and minimal advice on structuring the curriculum. Yet, its treatment of learning outcomes is rudimentary, predates most of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and therefore lacks scholarly validation, does little beyond calling for assessment, and provides scant examples from practice for replication (Wahlke 1991, 48–60).

Given the advent of SoTL, a growing body of discipline-specific resources currently exists. For some resources, programs will do well outside of the discipline. For example, if a program needs guidance in developing learning outcomes, there is the Association of American Colleges & Universities VALUE rubrics (Rhodes 2010). Otherwise, a program must search other political science program webpages (or sister disciplines) for good treatments. Yet, for other areas, there are valuable disciplinary resources. For example, programs desiring examples of how political science programs structure the major, the *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations* can be consulted (Ishiyama, Miller, and Simons 2015). As a primary resource, McClellan (2015; 2019) identifies the following different approaches used in the discipline:

- the “curriculum-as-content” pathway or a distributional model requiring courses in multiple disciplinary subfields
- the “curriculum-as-product” pathway or a sequential model using a building-block approach recommended by the Wahlke Report or a student-learning outcomes model

would be convenient if APSA brought these resources together in one readily accessible location. More important, political scientists need to continue developing these resources.

#### POLITICAL SCIENCE'S PUBLIC RELATIONS PROBLEM<sup>1</sup>

In Steven Smith's opening presentation at the June 2019 APSA conference, he referenced the UCLA Higher Education

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- the “curriculum-as-process” pathway using high-impact practices such as service learning, deliberation, and community engagement
- the “curriculum-as-praxis” pathway using the social-change model of deconstructing the “hidden” curriculum of the dominant social class

Along with his typology, McClellan offers important caveats. First, he emphasizes that models are not mutually exclusive; programs do combine them. Programs commonly join the distributional model (requiring lower-level introductory courses across the subfields) with the sequential model (requiring research design/methods and/or statistics before the capstone senior class). Additionally, McClellan (2015; 2019) emphasizes that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model. Each program customizes a model(s) based on any number of factors—for example, the particular expertise of the faculty, unique student body or institutional qualities, regional interests, or state regulations. Other disciplinary studies have found that the distributional model dominates, with the sequential model a distant second and the remaining models used occasionally (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019; Ishiyama 2005, 71–75; Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006). Another study validates the educational value of the Wahlke Report's recommendation for sequential course structuring (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003, 83–86).

Regarding program (and course) assessment, the discipline has a robust literature. There is *Assessment in Political Science*

Research Institute survey of freshmen. It consistently finds that more than eight of every 10 freshmen choose to go to college to enhance their employability (Eagan et al. 2017, 8; Stolzenberg et al. 2019, 41). Smith challenged political science to consider how the discipline can better address the employability concerns of these students. His challenge to political science becomes more demanding but essential as we consider the bifurcated public relations problem that hampers the discipline.

Foremost, political science is part of the liberal arts and the public is skeptical of the employability of such degrees, despite its graduates having good employment records (Association of American Colleges & Universities 2014). Liberal arts faculty routinely field concerns of current and prospective students (and their parents) about the job preparation that graduates receive and the career paths that they pursue. Critics complaining about the “students-as-consumers” model have captured public opinion, stereotyping liberal arts majors as “poetry-spouting baristas” (Felder 2018; see also Harris 2018). They demand concrete career tracks. Promoting the idea that liberal arts programs lack such career paths, the students-as-consumers model advises students to choose a “better” major, such as business (D'Amico 2018; Gonzalez 2016).

Whereas some students shun political science out of concern for the job preparation it will provide as a liberal arts degree, others do so because the jobs associated with it are unpopular. When politician, lawyer, and bureaucrat are the

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(Deardorff, Hamann, and Ishiyama 2009) and the assessment section of *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen* (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013). The *Journal of Political Science Education* and *PS: Political Science & Politics* publish articles on assessment. Thus, the discipline has resources to assist in curriculum structuring and program assessment. It

occupations people think of for the discipline, it compounds the public relations problem. All three occupations rank among the 10 most unpopular professions. When students research occupations online, they find that lawyers rank as the fourth or fifth most-hated profession, politicians rank sixth or eighth, and bureaucrats such as tax examiners (fifth

or sixth) and school principals (third) place as well (McKay 2019; Reddy 2020).

Because students are more focused on employability, political science remains plagued by the twofold public relations problem. How can the discipline combat these issues? Answer: career advising and job preparation. APSA recognizes the importance of career advising, offering guidance for students, faculty, and departments (APSA 2019). Yet, a disciplinary study by Collins, Knotts, and Schiff (2012, 91) found that “only a small number of political science departments are implementing specific career-preparation models designed to meet the needs of their students.” In fact, of the four best practices they identified, 62% of departments surveyed use none; only 4% use three of four; and no departments used all four (Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012, 90). They concluded that political science is not doing enough “in preparing students to enter a modern job market that emphasizes pragmatism” and is “undervaluing the skills of liberal arts majors” (Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012, 91). Although critical of political science, the Collins, Knotts, and Schiff (2012) study is an invaluable source for the tools available if the discipline wants to do better.

To improve, the political science discipline must balance its priorities. It has a strong post-collegiate education record. More than half of political science graduates pursue postgraduate education (Lewis 2017, 470). Political science programs are actively marketed as law school preparation. This pays off; Berkman (2020) finds that political science is the most common degree among those applying to law school. Also, political scientists routinely recruit majors to graduate school. Political scientists inevitably seek to replenish their ranks, recruiting its best majors to the profession. Political scientists should be wary of expending too much energy and resources into these routes. One reason is the financial debt that students incur, especially given that many do not complete the program. Less than 25% of graduates complete professional degrees such as the juris doctorate and only 5.5% earn doctorates (Lewis 2017, 468–70). Should disciplinary efforts and resources go disproportionately to postgraduate education when many students terminate with a bachelor's degree?

Although the post-collegiate education record is strong and is to be maintained, the discipline has a good story to tell about its majors who stop at the bachelor's degree. Lewis's (2017) “Do Political Science Majors Succeed in the Labor Market?” should be routine disciplinary reading. Although he finds that political science graduates “have above-average unemployment rates in their 20s,” he adds that majors ending at the bachelor's degree have good success securing private-sector work. Lewis (2017, 468) notes the post-collegiate success, writing that political science majors “are among the most likely to obtain graduate degrees and earn meaningfully more than those in most other social sciences and humanities.” Yet, he observes that most graduates are not politicians, bureaucrats, or lawyers and judges but rather are employed in management, sales, and education (Lewis 2017, 469–71). Another fact that freshmen should hear is “Political science majors...earn, on average, 67% more than comparable high school graduates” (Lewis 2017, 471). The initial unemployment

rate is disconcerting but the overall story should appease the concerns of the public and the students-as-consumers advocates. Along with the Collins, Knotts, and Schiff (2012) advice, the discipline can improve the early unemployment rate of graduates by requiring internships and service-learning and community-engagement activities and by integrating other job-preparation activities.

#### THE CAREER-STRUCTURED POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR

What else can be done? Another possibility that addresses student-employability concerns while combatting political science's twofold public relations problem is demonstrated by the examples of the University of Oregon (UO) and Arkansas Tech University (ATU). Both institutions are using a career-structured approach to the major curriculum; therefore, McClellan's (2015; 2019) typology should be expanded to include a “curriculum-as-job-preparation” model.

Structuring curriculum for career preparation has a long history but tends to be associated with vocational education. Today, from secondary vocational programs to trade schools, community colleges, and colleges and universities, career preparation remains an educational staple. Various curricular strategies (e.g., Developing a Curriculum, Integrated System for Workforce Education Curricula, and Independent School Districts) and tools (e.g., school- and work-based approaches, modeling, simulations, and competency-based education [CBE]) are used in vocational education. Of interest here are the parameters of the model (Bailey 2010a, 929). Bailey argued that vocational education is concerned with the process or the experiences gained in school and the product or student competency once in the workplace post-graduation. On the process side, content includes the responsibilities and standards of jobs—that is, the “work ethics, work habits, safety, applied academics, and legal issues” (Bailey 2010a, 929). On the product side, assessing (e.g., CBE) for the successful achievement of desired outcomes is essential (Bailey 2010b, 930). Bailey (2010a, 928) added that an “enduring principle” of vocational education is “its close relevance to the world of work.” This entails building partnerships and creating employment pipelines for students. Vocational education is not without criticism; some scholars argue that it reduces education to job preparation. However, others (e.g., John Dewey) advocate a “democratic vocational curriculum” that promotes critical thinking and the “ability to ask critical questions about societal and economic inequities and to work for a better future” (Bailey 2010b, 930–31).

As political scientists read this description of vocational education, they should be struck by how much resonates with political science. The discipline routinely addresses ethics and legal issues, social and economic inequities, modeling and simulations, and both school- and community-based (if not work-based) education through coursework, service learning, and community-engagement activities. Many educational strategies and values intersect. Some political science programs develop quasi-pipelines for postgraduate education (i.e., law and graduate schools) or through school with internships, service learning, and community-engagement activities in government agencies, community organizations, nonprofits,

Table 1

Curriculum as Career Preparation

Arkansas Tech University	University of Oregon
<b>Law School Track</b> –Those interested in law school and judicial-branch careers	<b>Politics, Law, and Justice Career Path</b> –Judge, clerk, attorney, legislative analyst, police, community organizer
<b>Public Policy/Administration Track</b> –Government-agency positions, think tank, and interest-group work	<b>Public Policy &amp; Political Action Career Path</b> –Government agency, campaign manager, lobbyist, investigative journalist, congressional aide
<b>International Relations Track</b> –Diplomats or work with multinational organizations and corporations	<b>Global Engagement Career Path</b> –Foreign-service officer, teacher, business executive, refugee activist, international lawyer, journalist
<b>Strategic Studies Track</b> –Military or diplomatic career work	<b>Politics of Business Career Path</b> –Chief operations officer, communications director, marketing or business-development director, management consultant, project manager
<b>American Politics, Campaigns, &amp; Elections</b> –Political campaign and political-party work and those interested in pursuing elected office	<b>Sustainability, Development, and Social-Action Path</b> –Sustainability director, environmental activist, social organizer, conservation advocate, initiatives manager, international-development agency leader
<b>Political Science Graduate-School Track</b> –Those interested in graduate school	<b>Ethics, Identity, &amp; Society Career Path</b> –Public defender, community organizer, investigative journalist, environmental activist, representative (local, state, or national), NGO leader, school administrator

data-processing firms, and think tanks. That said, as a liberal arts program, political science gives students knowledge and skills valuable in a variety of careers, not only one job or sector. Traditionally, the political science curriculum is not organized by career tracks. Typically, progressing through the major does not result in certificates and/or licensures such as in nursing and accounting.

Yet, two political science programs adopted the career-structured model from vocational education. The political science program at UO is large—more than 700 majors and 20 faculty lines—whereas at ATU, it is small—approximately 50 majors and three faculty. Table 1 shows how both institutions revised the major into career tracks. Each learned of the model from sister disciplines. At UO, the approach came from the general social studies (GSS) major. ATU discovered the approach by reading DeMillo’s (2013, 163–67) *Abelard to Apple*, which Georgia Tech College of Computing (2019) used for computer science majors as well as for its communications program. The following discussion describes how each program revised the degree.

As shown in figure 1, the mid-2010s at OU represented a decline in political science majors from a high of 799 in 2010–2011. The decline was expected because the GSS major was added to reduce the load on political science (Rogers 2020). However, by 2014–2015, the major had declined by 35% (i.e., to 280 students). A survey of majors revealed that subfields had little meaning for students. Department head Craig Parsons explained that majors desired a “sense of the concrete careers” that the degree offers (Rogers 2020). This prompted the department’s decision to adopt a career-structured model. In 2015–2016, it started to experience some major enrollment recovery (i.e., 36 students). However, in the four years since its adoption in the fall of 2016, the department has averaged the addition of more than 48 majors each year. Enrollment is

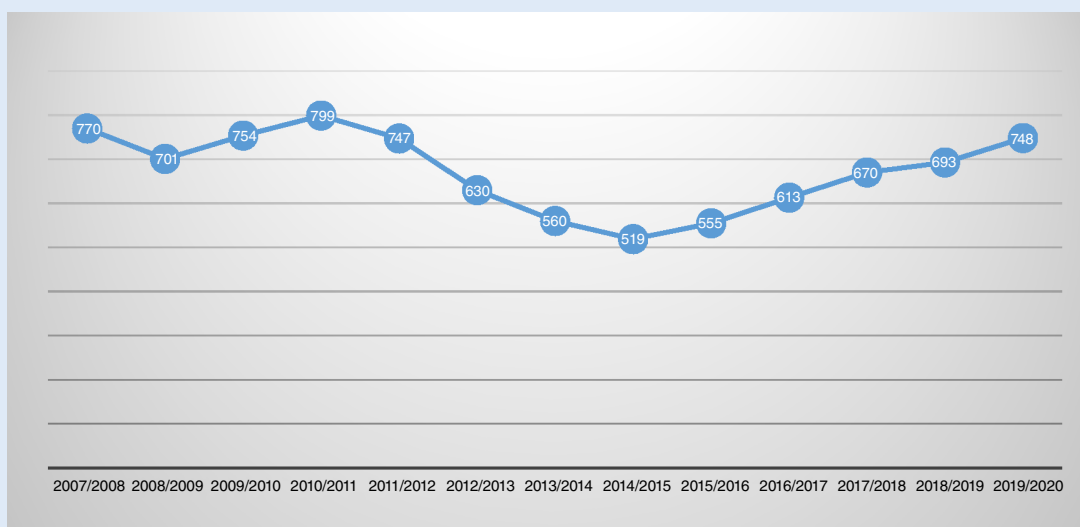
now on par with its 2000s numbers. Parsons emphasized that these increases represented new students; the department’s growth has not been at the expense of GSS numbers. More important, the reform is praised by the administration, which touts the political science department’s career-structured major to other campus programs (Rogers 2020).

At ATU, the political science major was created in 2010 and reformed by 2016. The original iteration was about graduate-school preparation. The distributional model was adopted, requiring students to take lower- and upper-level courses in the subfields. A research design course, a statistics course, and a senior capstone class were required. Figure 2 shows that the new major experienced good growth, obtaining a high of 44 majors in three years. Then, stagnation ensued on the 9,000-student campus; worse, it avoided and/or underperformed in research design, statistics, and the senior seminar. ATU’s program assessment includes exit interviews with seniors, who gave consistent negative feedback on these courses. The prelaw students—approximately one third of the majors—believed that statistics had no value for them. Worse, during the past 12 years, only one graduate went on to political science graduate school; he terminated with the master’s degree.

Valuing exposure to the breadth of the discipline, ATU’s revised major retained the distributional approach at the lower level, requiring introductory courses in each subfield. Then, in accordance with the Wahlke Report (1991), scaffolding was introduced. The research design course was required before the senior capstone seminar and statistics became an elective. Table 1 shows how ATU organized its upper-level elective courses into career pathways. Like UO, ATU experienced a new phase of growth (i.e., from 41 to 57 students) after the revision. Enrollments have since leveled off, but senior exit interviews remain more positive post reform.

Figure 1

### University of Oregon Political Science Majors by Academic Year



Note: Data courtesy of College of Arts and Science, University of Oregon.

Although two examples are not generalizable, the major growth experienced at UO and ATU post implementation makes the career-oriented approach to structuring the major curriculum worth considering by departments reforming their program. Why adopt the curriculum-as-job-preparation model? Parsons explains that it is a “clever” way to market the major to students (Rogers 2020). This captures ATU’s thinking as well. Both programs liked how the model tackled

set of career tracks. Table 1 demonstrates commonalities (i.e., law school, public policy, and global/international relations pathways) and differences: ATU created a strategic studies track for its students with a military background and/or career interests; UO has business and environmental activism (Arkansas Tech University 2019; University of Oregon 2019). Additionally, deciding which courses go in which tracks is the purview of the program faculty. Faculty make the

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the proverbial career question up front. The major curriculum communicates to current and prospective students (and their parents) a concrete sense of the careers that graduates pursue.

Regarding implementation, the career-structured approach entails repackaging the existing curriculum into career tracks, which students (and parents) find more meaningful than disciplinary subfields. The challenge is not in creating or deleting courses but rather in convincing colleagues to adopt a nontraditional disciplinary curriculum structure. ATU did not introduce any new courses whereas UO added one (i.e., politics of business). UO used existing lower-level courses for its other five pathways (Rogers 2020). The remaining tasks include deciding which careers the curriculum supports, which courses should be required versus elective, and aligning courses with one or more pathways.

A few caveats can be drawn from these two examples. Echoing McClellan (2015; 2019), there is no universally correct

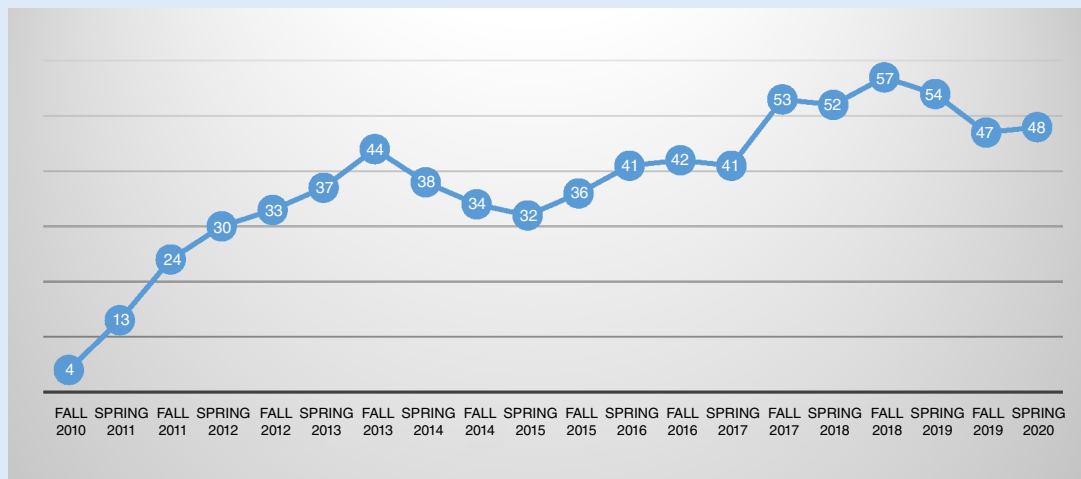
case for where to include courses and whether courses are appropriate to one or multiple tracks. In these two schools, state and local government fits multiple pathways; however, at OU, the politics of business fits only the business track (see online appendix A). Finally, observing different applications of the career-structured model can benefit programs. For example, ATU could draw on the UO example and diversify job listings for some tracks.

#### DISCUSSION

Adapting a career-structured model such as vocational education to political science is controversial. Advocates of the liberal arts, in general, and political scientists, in particular, will question this “vocationalization” (Kliebard 1999). The intention is not to reduce education or political science to career preparation. Political science should follow Dewey’s cue and humanize the vocational model (Bailey 2010b, 931–33).

Figure 2

Arkansas Tech University Political Science Majors by Semester



Note: Data courtesy of ATU Institutional Research.

Marineau (2019, 2–4) suggests how this might look through his Weberian approach to the career question. He argues that political science majors fit three ideal-types: the researcher (“consumers” and “producers of political science research”); the activist (those “engaged in political processes over issues they are passionate about”); and the leader (those with “skills and tools necessary to flourish in a range of career options”). His ideal-types correspond well with APSA’s “tripartite” purpose at its origins, which was to develop good citizens and political leaders, train future public administrators, and produce political scientists (Rogers 2017, 76). Marineau (2019) replaces bureaucrat with activist and then uses more general labels: researchers for political scientists and leaders for good citizens and political leaders. To resist vocationalization while meeting the student-as-consumers movement halfway, political science can use these Weberian ideal-types, offering “democratic citizenship,” “community activist,” and “ethical leadership” tracks.

As political scientists develop guidelines for the discipline, they need to assemble a variety of resources to assist programs in rethinking the major. This work pulls together available discipline-specific resources and adds a new model to McClellan’s (2015; 2019) typology of curriculum structures that political science uses. Although too small a number to be generalizable, UO and ATU both experienced enrollment growth after adopting the “curriculum-as-job-preparation” model. This approach helps political science programs to address the employability concerns driving more than 80% of freshmen while combating the discipline’s bifurcated public relations problem. Of course, students are not locked into the career of their elective track when they choose a pathway. Majors will continue to receive a well-rounded liberal arts education that prepares them for a variety of careers. They simply will enter the program with a better understanding of the types of jobs that many political science graduates pursue.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001791>. ■

NOTE

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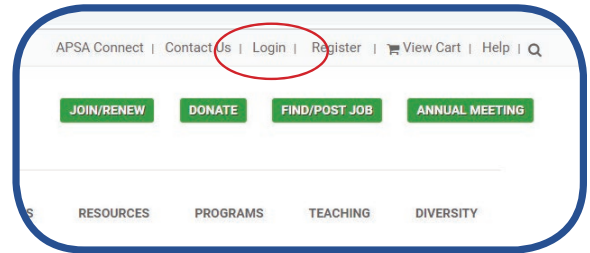
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# Access Your Journals through the APSA Website

1

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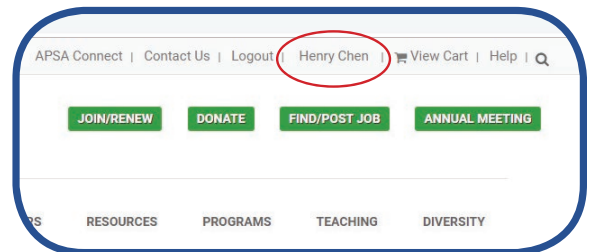
A screenshot of the 'Sign In' form on the APSA website. It includes a text input field for 'yourAPSUsername' and a password field with masked characters. A 'Sign In' button is located at the bottom left of the form.

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2

3

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A screenshot of the APSA user profile page for Henry Chen. The page is divided into several sections: 'Membership Info' (showing membership type and expiration), 'APSA Journals' (a list of journals with a red arrow pointing to it), 'Demographics' (personal information), and 'Section Membership' (a table of journal subscriptions). The 'APSA Journals' section lists titles like 'American Political Science Review' and 'Journal of Experimental Political Science'.

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4

