

# Community College and University Partnerships for the Political Science Major

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College-bound students have more options than ever to begin and continue their education. They can begin in high school with dual-credit classes. On high school graduation, they can enroll in a four-year public institution, a private university, or a community college. Then they can attend college traditionally using face-to-face instruction, online instruction at the college or at a remote location, or a combination of both. Today, in higher education, students are “shopping smarter” in choosing their best option. That option often is taking as many dual-credit classes as possible in high school and then attending community college before transferring to a four-year institution.

Our work is cut out for us. The good news is that we are seeing an increase in enrollment in political science classes. The American Political Science Association (APSA 2018) reported slight increases from 2016–2017 to 2017–2018. Departments reported 72.5% of these increases were due to departmental- and/or institutional-related factors, and 40.9% reported it was due to a greater political interest in the 2016 election.

This article highlights the importance of communication among all of the institutions contributing to students’ education and how we can collaborate to prepare and guide them toward a major in political science. First I discuss the role and importance of community colleges in the educational process. Second, I discuss current practices and suggestions to describe the partnerships being forged between high schools and community colleges, and then between community colleges and four-year universities, to increase enrollment. With more communication and enrollment, there also is potential for more political science majors. Third, I discuss unexpected benefits that could result from these partnerships.

## THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2019), the average cost per year at a community college is \$3,660 and at a public, in-state, four-year college is \$10,230. The median earning of full-time employees with an associate’s degree is \$42,600, increasing to \$60,100 for those with a bachelor’s degree. Almost half (49.2%) of students begin their college journey at a community college, where they are more likely to come from a lower-income family than those at a four-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research

Center 2017). In fact, low-income students are three times more likely to begin their education at a community college than high-income students (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2011). Furthermore, despite having similar grades and math and reading assessment scores, lower-income students coming from the top quartile academically in high school also are more likely to begin at a community college (Theokas and Bromberg 2014).

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation (Glynn 2019) commissioned a study and found the following:

1. More than 35,000 community college students enroll at selective colleges and universities each year.
2. Selective institutions are less likely to enroll community college students than other institutions.
3. Community college students represent fewer than half of all transfer students at selective institutions and are underrepresented compared with those coming from high school or transferring from another four-year institution.
4. Community college students who transfer to selective institutions have equal to higher graduation rates as those who enrolled directly from high school or those who transferred from another four-year institution. They graduate in a reasonable amount of time, earning their degrees in two and a half years, on average.

The point is that students from community colleges have the potential to outperform those coming directly from high school or transferring from another institution, but it is more difficult for them to gain admission to these selective institutions.

Part of the problem is overcoming the stigma of attending a community college. We often hear the comparison between community colleges and “real” colleges, implying that a community college is less valid. The myths regarding community colleges include (1) they are easier than universities, (2) the professors are less qualified, (3) they do not have any student life, (4) credits will not transfer, and (5) they do not offer as much academic or financial support.

In reality, it is more about the qualifications and experience of professors than the type of school. Requirements vary, but most community colleges require professors to have a master’s degree and a minimum of 18 hours in their teaching field. Additionally, the primary job of a community college professor

is teaching with a focus on the education of their students rather than a research agenda. Most community colleges offer activities and organizations for students. On-campus housing and

many students to take their first government class through dual credit; therefore, we must actively work with high schools to ensure the quality of those courses.

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sports programs are increasing. It is true that public colleges tend to accept transfer credits more than private institutions, and the transfer process is not always easy, but this can be improved. Community colleges stress academic and financial advising. Federal student loans are available regardless of the type of institution (Barrington 2019).

#### STRATEGIES TO CREATE PARTNERSHIPS WITH HIGH SCHOOLS

It is imperative that we capture students as early as possible and assist them when they are beginning their academic journey, which can begin as early as junior high school. Programs aimed at graduating students as quickly as possible and getting them into the workforce are growing in popularity, particularly with state legislatures. For instance, in Texas, the Higher Education Coordinating Board (2019) has the 60x30 plan, which has four main goals to achieve by 2030: (1) 60% of Texans ages 25 to 34 will have a certificate or degree; (2) 550,000 students will complete a certificate or degree; (3) all will have marketable skills; and (4) student loan debt will not exceed 60% of projected first-year wages.

As stated previously, students have more options than ever when choosing the path for their higher education. For example, the number of students who are *dually enrolled* in high school and college classes has increased dramatically. The term “dual enrollment” is defined as students enrolled in courses that count for both high school and college credit. They also are called dual-credit or concurrent enrollment. Between 2002 and 2010, the number increased by 67%, and community colleges had 69% of that enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges 2019). Proponents of dual credit claim that these classes prepare students for the academic rigors of college, possibly lower the cost of higher education, and help students understand the academic and social skills needed for higher education. Although programs vary from state to state, there are several considerations. In some cases, it is the responsibility of students to pay the tuition; in other cases, there is no cost to them. Eligibility requirements vary, but most community colleges have open enrollment. Instructors can be high school teachers and/or college professors, depending on requirements set by the states. According to the Higher Learning Commission (2017), the sole possession of a master of education degree without regard to the discipline of the dual-credit course is not evidence of faculty qualification. Classes can be on the high school and/or college campus. Currently, 29 states require public postsecondary institutions to accept dual-credit classes in some form (Horn et al. 2018). There certainly is potential for

*Career academies* are open-enrollment programs that complement existing rigorous academic curricula. As early as the ninth grade, students can embark on pathways that enable them to fulfill high school graduation requirements and earn college credits, leading to industry certifications or university transfer programs. On completion of high school, many can enter the workforce, but they have been exposed to higher education, and many choose to continue their college education while beginning their career. Currently, career academics in criminal justice and public service could provide pathways to political science.

A *field of study (FOS)* is a selection of lower-division courses guaranteed by state law to transfer and apply to a degree program. For those states that have an FOS in government or political science, students that take government courses are assured that the credits will transfer.

Research has shown that participation in an *honors program* contributes to student success in the classroom as well as higher completion rates (Bowman and Culver 2018). Participation is linked to a higher GPA, retention to the third and fourth years of college, and higher graduation rates. Because students are taking dual-credit classes at the high school level, this is an opportunity to recruit them to community college and then the university level.

Finally, *guided pathways* involve mapping programs to specify course sequences, progress milestones, and program learning outcomes so that students know what they need to do to prepare for a career and for further education and training in their field of interest. It allows students to complete coursework in the shortest amount of time, with success. The theory is that these pathways will simplify decision making for students; track their progress, highlighting what they have accomplished and what they have left to do; and ensure success for completing on time. Guided pathways also should allow students to build the skills needed for employment or for further education. These programs consist of four major steps: (1) mapping pathways to student end goals, (2) helping students choose and enter a program pathway, (3) keeping students on the path, and (4) ensuring that students are learning. Too many students would enter a community college or even a university with no clearly defined goals or plans. The concern is for students wasting time and money on courses that will not count. As stated previously, these guided pathways can begin at the junior- and/or senior-high levels. For those students choosing the social science pathway, we can work directly with those who are particularly interested in political science to guide them through the process.

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## STRATEGIES TO CREATE PARTNERSHIPS WITH COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

It can be difficult to transfer from a community college to a four-year institution, and there is fault on both sides. Too many students are not receiving adequate transfer advice at the community college level. Colleges and universities often have confusing credit-transfer policies. Many colleges limit the number of transfer students, meaning that they are missing out on high-performing community college students who have already demonstrated the ability to do superior college-level work.

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From data on the 2016 entering class, almost 70% entered from high school compared to slightly more than 15% transferring from a community college (Glynn 2019). The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Phi Theta Kappa (i.e., an international honor society for community college students) both offer generous transfer scholarships for community college students. Phi Theta Kappa students must have a 3.5 GPA; Jack Kent Cooke Foundation scholarship recipients must have a 3.98 GPA. Colleges and universities that are not recruiting from these high-performing transfers are missing out on an incredible pool of applicants (Giancola and Davidson 2015).

*Working together, we can increase the number of political science majors.*

*Articulation agreements* are partnerships between at least two institutions of higher education, typically a community college and a four-year college or university. The goal is to create a seamless transfer for students. These agreements allow students to begin rigorous coursework at a community college in a particular field with the assurance that they will be granted admission with all of their credits in that field at the four-year institution. Community colleges and universities should work together to ensure that political science majors are included in these agreements. Several universities that have made a commitment to creating these partnerships include the University of California System, Transfer Admission Guarantee; Massachusetts Community Colleges, Commonwealth Commitment Program; and the Florida College System, Transfer Programs (Koromi 2020).

*Internships* provide an excellent stepping stone for those students considering a major in political science. Interning with an elected official or a nonprofit organization can provide students with hands-on training and stimulate an interest in the political process and civic responsibility. Both community colleges and universities should encourage and promote internships as long as they are carefully designed and available to all students.

Participating in *undergraduate research* is an effective method to help students develop problem-solving skills, to improve student retention, and to provide connections from

the classroom to the world of work. It also provides an opportunity for teamwork and problem solving as well as sharpening communication skills, all of which are necessary for any job. Because more students are beginning their education at the community college level, providing these undergraduate research opportunities is important. The *Social Science Texts and Academic Research* is a journal founded in 2018 that publishes undergraduate research from students at two-year institutions. This is an excellent opportunity for political science students to spotlight their research and build

their academic resumé. Community college faculty should encourage their political science students to begin this research process early, and universities should recognize these achievements during the admissions process.

## CONCLUSION

Community colleges continue to serve a vital role in the United States by providing access to a college education. We are preparing students for the next phase in achieving a baccalaureate degree. Working together, we can increase the number of political science majors. All of us have the oppor-

tunity to introduce the field on different levels to students in various ways. Community college faculty should partner with their local university and invite political science professors to discuss the types of classes available in the field.

Two final considerations for the disciple of political science result from these partnerships. Recruiting from community colleges opens up the field of applicants, especially when it is proven that these students make good transfer students. More than half of low-income students, almost half of Hispanic students, and about one third of African American students begin their academic career at a community college. Therefore, that field of applicants also will be more diverse (Xu, Jaggars, and Fletcher 2016). A larger applicant pool with greater diversity is an advantage. ■

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