



# Addressing the Identity Issue of Political Science Majors

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## ABSTRACT

Recent data and information from APSA describe a crisis for Political Science educators in terms of addressing the changing needs and challenges facing students as well as the declining enrolments in Political Science curriculum across the nation.

Two issues found with these reports are that:

- None of them address major outcomes as a way to address creating curriculum standards across the board to meet the desired results of a better prepared major student.
- The courses do little to address the multiple career paths of Political Science majors. This paper addresses these two areas and how they can create a better identity for a department.

**Keywords:** Political science; Government agency; Skills; Internships; Careers and vocations

## INTRODUCTION

Vocational identity is something many colleges and universities ignore or leave to their career development centers. “A false dichotomy between liberal education and career preparation is preventing productive conversation about career development in the academy, particularly in the arts and sciences” [1]. As a discipline, Political Science is not unlike this as a liberal arts one area often neglected in developing positive career understanding is in department outcomes. Recent history demonstrates that Political Science, as a discipline, needs to adapt to help students with their vocational identity.

The Wahlke Report examined Political Science as a major on college campuses and recommended areas of improvement.

The report prescribed three areas of improvement for political science programs:

- 1) Have an introductory course that serves as the springboard for sequential learning in the major;
- 2) Address methodology and theory within the discipline;
- 3) Have a “Capstone experience” or senior level seminar that addresses that major as a whole at the end of a student undergraduate experience [2].

“Rethinking the Undergraduate Political Science Major: The Wahlke Report Revisited.” by Smith and McConaughy

demonstrated that many departments responded positively to this challenge, restructuring their majors to meet these areas of improvement but also demonstrated that many of these changes do not meet the challenges ahead for political scientists and students enrolled in undergraduate political science courses [3].

Much of the data leading up to 2016 indicated decreased enrollments in political science programs. The American Political Science Association reports an increased enrollment for political science courses and declared majors nationwide since 2016 [4]. The Wahlke Report was formulated to address areas of improvement based on decades of research, mainly focused on decreasing student admissions and improved outcomes for the political science major. There are several issues with this approach in contemporary programs. First, not all the students being addressed in political science courses are majors. Second, many program outcomes focus on informational aspects that lead to better political science majors but not necessarily address the career aspirations of majors. Third, the outcomes have become static in response to the changing generational differences in approaches to information, especially regarding politics. Finally, courses are not always structured in a manner that allow for career development.

Several steps could be taken to address areas of concern. The first step should be improving program outcomes to help students better understand politics as an applied field of study. Outcomes designed in this manner would help non-majors and majors create a clearer connection between information presented in the

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classroom to actual careers, additionally, addressing the need for major students to understand who they are as graduates of political science programs. Second, departments need to identify areas within courses that allow discussion of careers and opportunities in the field of political science, creating a vocational identity. While introductory and senior level courses meet this requirement, other courses should fit into this discussion as they also contribute to learning and vocational identity. This process could also increase job placement of students in the long term. Last many students lack an understanding of how politics fits what they may do in their daily lives. The third step of improving the political science major should concentrate on areas of concerns within the current generation of students and present politics as a positive solution for issues. This allows for majors and non-majors alike to see the importance of politics, especially given the negative context of politics in contemporary society.

## IMPROVING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

To quickly assess major outcomes for a variety of Political Science departments across the United States, a web search was used to examine common themes amongst the numerous programs. Although not the best scientific method of inquiry, this is the means by which most students find out about department outcomes. The common areas addressed in program outcomes, or at least those listed online or in the online catalog, were:

- Understand concepts and theories
- Identify structures and processes
- Critically think
- Develop written and oral communication along with research skills
- Learn how to engage in the political process

Not surprisingly, all of these are also areas identified in the Wahlke Report as vital for improving programs. The good news, therefore, is that many departments took the Wahlke Report seriously in their application of department outcomes.

Conversely, these are indirectly related to a Political Science major as a reason for someone getting job in the field [5]. Most departments feature something concerning the career paths of their graduates, but little is shown how these graduates got to their present positions. Many of the websites report that their graduates work or go into three distinct areas:

- Government service/work for a government agency
- Law school or law practice
- Political jobs (national, state, and local examples)

Several departments state that their graduates cite the department outcomes as reasons for getting their career placement. Looking at the commonly listed program outcomes from above, the third outcome (critically think) and fourth outcome (develop written and oral communication along with research skills) are generic enough for any liberal arts major (and even pre-professional programs should be addressing these areas). Even though learning about concepts, theories, identities, and structures is important, the main reason many departments focus on these areas is likely that they are easily measurable; program outcomes allow for easy data collection while also addressing what a student will learn in the major.

In practical terms, learning how to engage in the political process is very important and understood by many departments as vital for creating good students in the major and minor.

**Is engaging in the process, or just learning to engage in the process, enough for learning about career paths?:** Some studies show that engaging in the process helps in career development but this limits to specific fields, mainly allowing students some job shadowing or experiential development but not fully exploring other options as well [6]. Therefore, it would be helpful to have a program outcome that shows students specific attention given by a department toward understanding career paths, developing an understanding of these careers, and being able to discuss them in some manner. Additionally, it is important to revisit the program outcomes and see how they can develop a graduate with knowledge of themselves.

## Ohio university political science outcome

**Learning goal#4:** Students will develop knowledge or career paths and appropriate tools to aid in professional development in the discipline or in public and international affairs [7]. Specifically, students in specialized, upper-division courses (3000 and 4000 level) will be able to identify career opportunities in academia and/or public and international affairs, which match planned career paths. Describe and develop specific experiences, skills, and/or academic credentials related to their career paths.

**Objective#1:** 4000 Level students will be able to identify career opportunities in academia and/or public and international affairs, which match planned career paths.

**Objective#2:** 4000 Level students will be able to describe and develop specific experiences, skills, and/or academic credentials related to their career paths.

One example of outcomes that met the need for vocational development was Ohio University's Political Science department. Ohio University Political Science not only had an outcome identified but they further created objectives for carrying out the goal. This fits the needs of students by providing them a chance for understanding careers in political science. It also allows them to "develop specific experiences, skills, and/or academic credentials" so that they are prepared for their professional career. One area of concern, however, is that they wait until upper level courses to do this. It also states "specialized, upper-division courses" but specific courses are not identified online. The common course identified by most Political Science departments related to "career" or "job" is an internship. Not to take away from internships but these can sometimes limit the experiences of students and place a lot more time and resources from smaller departments for creating placements with real experience, not just filing and answering phones.

Improving department outcomes can be as easy as identifying objectives connected to the main outcome. Going back the commonly listed department outcomes, it would be easy to narrow down some goals or objectives that could allow students to explore majors. If the department outcome listed is "Understand concepts and theories," one of the related goals could be a discussion of careers that apply concepts and theories. Small changes like this would allow departments to show potential majors areas of career exploration as well as allow easy data on job placement, possibly even increasing job placement percentages. Having an outcome

that directly addresses careers in the field of Political Science allows departments to get to the next step of figuring out which courses fit this objective.

## IDENTIFY COURSES WHERE CAREER/ VOCATIONAL IDENTITY HAPPENS

Departments do well in promoting what kinds of jobs their graduates go into or showing that their graduates are in a variety of employable areas. Very little attention is given to how these students land these jobs or how they are led into this career path. Based on quick catalog searches, the only courses that even focus on terms like “career” or “job” tend to be internships. As mentioned previously, these really depend on what kind of experience a student has in the internship. The structure of an internship course also has an impact on actual career exploration. If there has not been any examination into other possible careers or experiences, students might just rely on their impression that they understand the professional field of study.

An argument could be made that this is not really the responsibility of a faculty or department. However, it is becoming increasingly a problem for college campuses. “Only a third of students believe they will graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful in the job market and in the workplace. Just half believe their major will lead to a good job” [8]. A 2018 article in Inside Higher Ed, using the Strada-Gallup poll information, demonstrates why it is a problem for faculty. “Students expressed more confidence when they had talked to an academic adviser or a faculty member about their careers, though. About 57% of the students who said a professor or another staff member started a conversation with them about a job felt confident in finding a job after graduation” [9]. It should be noted that departments that fail in job placement sometimes come under scrutiny and can face budget cuts or department cuts.

One of the first steps in discussing careers should focus on the differences between jobs, careers, and vocations. Wrzesniewski, et al. state that many of our views on “job” and “career” do not allow for actualization of needs when people are working [10]. Showing students that getting job is a means to one end demonstrates to them that any job can earn them money or gain prestige in some form. Focusing on the vocational identity is important for students and faculty. First, it allows students to see that their major leads to something more than just a paycheck and they find they are going into something that is allowing them to reach their full potential. Research shows that people are more likely to find job satisfaction through vocational identity [11].

Second, this is an area for course instructors to connect application to the information provided. This can be an opportunity for a guest speaker to demonstrate how a skill or concept in class is utilized in their field of study. It is also easy for everyone to relate to the job, Career and Vocation comparison in some part of their own life. Jobs are something we do for money. Most college students have had a job to make money but not as a professional area that they care to continue throughout their life. Careers are areas where people focus on developing skills that make them better workers and they recognize value in their work. A vocation is when the career becomes about filling a need or seeing fulfillment or value in more than the work, allowing one to see how it does something for the greater good (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Job, career, vocation comparison.

|         | Job        | Career                   | Vocation                 |
|---------|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Purpose | Pay bills  | Professional development | Calling in community     |
| Goal    | Make money | Achievement in work      | Fill a need/ fulfillment |

It is also important to note that discussions on vocation are important to not only a long term goal of the student but can also lead to overall satisfaction with the major. “Occupational engagement predicted vocational identity, and vocational identity fully mediated the relationship between occupational engagement and academic major satisfaction” [12]. Further evidence also suggests that this discussion allows students to be more engaged in their studies. “Through regression analysis, in-depth career exploration was found to be positively related to the student engagement variables, while career self-doubt emerged as a negative predictor” [13].

A course where this discussion is placed depends on the department and the level of study that fits naturally into the course design. For example, most departments have an introductory level course at the 100 level that is an overview of the field of Political Science. This overview can include a section on vocational identity or even career exploration within each subfield discussion. Courses like State and Local Government, Policy Studies, Public Administration, Campaigns, Public Opinion/Media, Research Methods, and any law related courses, many beyond the introductory course level, offer similar opportunities along with the ability to pull in guest speakers that can discuss career paths.

At the University of Mary, the recently redesigned Politics major allows discussion of careers in the introductory course (Foundations of Politics) for each subfield of Political Science. The internship program is designed specifically to allow students credit in developing skills in local, state, and federal offices or in fields related to their vocational interests. Some upper level courses, like some of the ones indicated above, include guest speakers that can address details of their daily schedules. Finally, the Senior Seminar was redesigned with vocational calling in mind. Instead of just being a recap of each area of the discipline, the course focuses on the concept embodied by a local CEO that stated “we know a University of Mary graduate because they know themselves.” The focal point is to make certain that there is a firm grasp of self-identity and final career exploration the semester prior to graduation.

As previously mentioned, this discussion is also important with senior level students due to the increased problem with students feeling that they are not prepared for life after college. The University of Mary had separate majors focused on Political Philosophy and Public Policy. Neither major was attracting students at a rate the university felt was sustainable and the students graduating in the majors felt unprepared for life after college. Job placement rates were in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. One step was to combine the majors into one major. The step that had greatest impact on student satisfaction was discussing vocational identity, allowing the Politics department to increase job placement and law school acceptance up to 100% at the University of Mary.

This change has also helped non-majors better understand the role

of politics in various jobs in the community. Some of the largest majors at the University of Mary are in the area of health care. All incoming freshman are required to take POL 101 Responsible Citizenship. A common assignment for this course is for students to find policies involved in their future professions and discuss how someone in their field of study would have to deal with this policy. A strong majority (around 75%) of polled seniors in the area of health care found that this assignment allowed them to better understand the impact of studying politics on their area of interest. Follow up with health care faculty confirmed that students felt like they had a better understanding of how politics related to their major, especially in their knowledge of policy areas.

## POLITICAL DISCOURSE, SMART GENERATION, AND MODELED BEHAVIOR

Jean Twenge has written extensively on the current generation of college students, born around late 1990s/early 2000, labeling them smart generation since they have grown up exclusively with smart phone technology. Her research points to a group of students more individualistic and libertarian in their political beliefs. "Compared to previous generations when they were young in these national surveys, smart generation is more likely to support abortion rights, homosexual marriage and authorizing the use of cannabis and less likely to support the death penalty-usually considered liberal beliefs. But they are also less likely to support gun control national health care and government environmental regulation-usually considered conservative beliefs" [14].

**What does this mean for Political Science and talking with majors and non-majors about politics?:** First, many of the current generation are growing up in a post factual world. "Science, journalism, and law are politicized and categorized as friends or foes. You are either with us or against us, and if you are against us, then you are fake news" [15]. The challenge becomes having a political discussion with this generation and having them understand reliable and valid information. Porter and Wood found that we are not in a post factual society; people retain facts when corrected but they stated it might be the consumption of correct information that is the issue rather than people not believing in the information [16]. Therefore, it is important for discussion of correct information with students.

Second, and related to this, the political discourse in the United States presents a challenge for political scientists as well. Pew Research found that 85% of Americans say that political debate "has become more negative and less respectful," and 73% say that "elected officials should avoid using heated language because it could encourage violence" [17]. Numerous authors, both classical and contemporary, support positive political discourse as being good for democracy based on many rationales [18-21]. "Aggressive language in political media has also been found to be associated with reduced political trust and negative evaluations of institutions [22,23].

Based on the trends of information (or lack of reliable information) and challenges of political discussion, finding ways to have a dialogue about politics grounded in a positive experience should be a goal for Political Science departments in some manner. "An understanding of the political contexts and issues of the contemporary world will inform students' later work and personal lives as well as their lives as community members and citizens [24]. This was echoed in 2012 when the Department of Education commissioned a report published by the Association of American

Colleges and Universities; A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future called on colleges and universities to meet the need for more civil discourse and civic learning [25]. A clearer standard related to these goals should be developed by departments in response to the increased trend of students having problems discussing politics in a meaningful way.

An effective method to use is modelling behavior in and out of the classroom to promote civil dialogue. Han, Brazeal, and Pennington demonstrate that even in the online environment, having discussion cues and creating conversation space allows for students to begin dialoguing with each other [26]. Online forum discussions can also be used so that students can work on writing and responding to each other. This allows students more time to think about their responses. Another method is having another faculty member take the time to come in and discuss an issue in front of the class, showing how disagreements should work in an academic environment. An alternative method is finding a video that examines an issue from multiple viewpoints and discussing this with the class. From experience, students quickly recognize the problems when people are uncivil in these debates or issues and how it impacts the information.

Modelling should also be effective outside of the classroom. Faculty should take the time to show students examples of where civility exists in society. Panel discussions should be used in a way that demonstrate how people disagree but have civil interactions about their disagreements. In some circumstances, government meetings can also demonstrate how decorum matters in conducting business and getting things done between political actors.

In all outlined situations, it is important to help students recognize how to avoid incivility. Some of the key areas of work include having students identify when they get emotional regarding an issue, how to deal with their emotions effectively to have better conversation and developing a repeated pattern so that they are primed to engage in discussion. Discussion about wording and body language is also important. Creating an open environment for discussion is not easy; however, it is very important if Political Science as a discipline wants to keep majors and non-majors engaged in political discussion.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper identified three areas of improvement for Political Science departments in engaging students in variety of manners. First, program outcomes should be improved to more adequately address potential careers in political science. Second, courses need to address career exploration with the possible consideration of focusing on vocational identity. Third, positive solutions and role modelling need to be established to help majors and non-majors focus on positive political outcomes.

Addressing program outcomes can be very difficult in many colleges due to the issues surrounding wording and need for data for assessment. As discussed, the simplest way to achieve this is through structure in designing outcomes. Subsets, additional goals, or further objectives can be listed under the main outcomes to allow for constructing both a means for gathering data as well as develop the area of concern to be addressed, including addressing the major as an exploration of vocational identity.

There are also issues within departments as to the best way to approach the topic of job, career, and/or vocational interests. Often, the approach is to find a course that everyone has to take



(either introductory or senior level) and leave it to a faculty member to address this in their rotation teaching that course. However, this paper and additional research indicates that reinforcement and discussion with students regarding their vocational identity has a positive impact on their current and future development in the major. Finding creative ways to integrate these discussions into courses should be a goal for retention as well as successful graduation and higher job placement rates. Not only does this help departments maintain or increase budgets, it also helps students become more successful in life.

Finally, strengthening our students' abilities to address positive political discourse is helpful for society. In having this discussion with both majors and non-majors, it allows them to see that politics is not just a zero-sum game and that a greater good exists. This approach often takes either outside help *via* guest speakers or positive role models in the community to help discuss ways to create civil discourse in society. Introducing students to a structured discussion and allowing them to learn to voice their opinions in a constructive manner allows them to learn more about an issue as well as gain valuable skills toward discussing issues into the future.

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