

A Professional Development Course for Political Science Undergraduates

Curtis Bram, *Duke University, USA*

ABSTRACT

This article describes a course designed to help political science majors formulate career goals, apply for internships and full-time positions, and eventually succeed on the job. Students benefit from exposure to guest speakers representing a range of careers and from collaborations with other campus institutions (e.g., the career center and graduate programs). Additionally, students produce job-market materials that highlight how their education has prepared them for life and work. Offering a similar professional-development course can help departments to increase enrollments and majors by increasing students' confidence in the career prospects associated with their major.

Of all freshmen enrolling in college, 80% choose to do so to enhance their employability; however, more than 60% of surveyed political science departments do not offer career-development resources (Rogers 2021). This article describes a course that takes advantage of resources across the institution to help students develop and work toward their career plans. What makes this course valuable for students is that it helps them to integrate the political science major with their goals for life after college. Departments offering such a course can better make the case that political science training will actively prepare students for leadership in their career and community.

Research shows that specialized public-service career courses can benefit both departments and students (Mallinson and Burns 2019). Whereas those more policy-focused courses are especially valuable for those who know what they want from their career, about 75% of political science graduates work in the private sector, and the most common occupation for those holding an undergraduate political science degree is administration and management. This means that relatively few students go on to a career directly related to their training, in contrast to majors such as business administration (Marineau 2020). In addition to matching course offerings to student needs, departments are facing pressure to emphasize the development of employable skills in undergraduate training (Ishiyama et al. 2021).

The gap between what departments are offering and what students need from their major suggests that departments should provide more career-development resources. Offering an optional


career-development course, such as the one described in this article, gives students the opportunity to prepare for a wide range of careers while simultaneously working to understand their goals and their options.

Since 2018, I have taught “Professionalization in Political Science” to Duke University undergraduates. The description outlines the goals and targeted audience for the course: “What will you do with your Duke degree? This course will prepare you for your professional life after leaving Duke, equipping you with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to thrive in your post-Duke career. The class is tailored for those interested in pursuing internships offered in the coming summer.” The course has three primary objectives: (1) develop and articulate career goals, (2) prepare to excel in the internship and job-application process, and (3) gain skills to succeed in an internship or job.

COURSE MAP

Figure 1 connects the goals of the course with the material covered throughout the semester, as described in this article.

The course is open to students in any stage of their college career.¹ By necessity, different components are more useful to students at different stages. Guest-speaker sessions are most impactful for those who are still deciding where to specialize (e.g., those choosing between international and domestic politics), and resumé crafting is especially useful to those applying for a competitive position in the near future. Students who choose to enroll often are motivated to care about this coursework because they view it as a direct connection to their future (Safronova, Miller, and Kuehl 2018).

Curtis Bram  is a PhD candidate at Duke University. He can be reached at curtis.bram@duke.edu.

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Figure 1

Links the Objectives of the Course to Class Activities



DEVELOPING CAREER GOALS

The first course objective is to help students formulate their career goals. Early in the semester, students write a reflection on how they got to where they are today and then present that reflection to the class. Writing helps them to think about the choices that they made and those that were made for them. Presenting helps peers to understand the range of backgrounds of their fellow students.

and some have reported that a speaker prompted them to explore a track that they had not previously considered. Speakers also make a case for students to explore potentially ignored resources at the university, such as courses that teach quantitative skills.²

Another component of the guest-speaker sessions is collaboration with the career center and (if applicable) graduate schools.

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Following the presentation, students write a second reflection (which they do not present) that outlines how they would like to spend their upcoming summer, their first year after graduating from college, and then their fifth year. This exercise encourages students to consider tradeoffs that they must confront as they graduate, including location preferences, family considerations, and requirements that accompany a high-powered career. The assignment prompts them to consider questions that they can ask guest speakers, who can help them consider these tradeoffs.

The course then takes advantage of resources across the university and that are local to the community to help students

Using one class period to physically visit the career center and meet with counselors helps students to know where the career center is located, the services it offers, and why they should make an appointment for personalized attention.

Beyond the career center, hosting a panel of representatives from different graduate schools helps students to learn what is required if they want to continue their education in different fields, and it also builds relationships across fields. Many political science graduates continue their education at a law school (Woessner, Winters, and Kopko 2017). Yet, many undergraduates are not aware of the importance of their LSAT scores and GPA for admission to highly

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formulate goals. About half of the meetings are guest-speaker sessions. These meetings add variety and maintain interest during the semester and highlight the range of careers that are possible with a political science degree. In my course, speakers have included bankers and finance professionals, diplomats from the US State Department, water-conservation activists, researchers from think tanks, political-communication specialists, and local nonprofit leaders. Students often have questions,

competitive law schools. Similarly, many do not realize that graduate political science education often is very different from undergraduate work. Hosting representatives from multiple schools also informs students about university-sponsored programs. For example, administrators from the business school informed students of a 4+1 program through which motivated undergraduates could earn a business degree in only one year, regardless of major. In another example, an administrator informed students about programs to

increase access to graduate school for members of underrepresented groups.

Faculty members who are considering offering such a course at a liberal arts college or in a less densely populated region may be constrained in their ability to collaborate with graduate schools or to bring in outside speakers. However, there likely are local entrepreneurs in almost any small town who would be happy to speak. Furthermore, local government leaders may be able to offer their time to students. As part of an approach to recruit speakers and also to increase student attendance, instructors can consider opening the guest-speaker sessions to all students. Finally, guest speakers can join the class via Zoom or other video-conferencing software.

CRAFTING APPLICATION MATERIALS

The second aim of the course is to help students succeed as they apply for an internship or a job. After a lecture about resumés and cover letters (which includes a simulation game to put students in the mindset of a hiring manager),³ students choose a position that they would like to apply for and bring physical copies of their newly drafted materials to class. Students then give one another feedback in small groups and submit revised materials to the instructor for another round of comments. This exercise highlights the value of collaboration across the institution. Because the peer-review session occurs after the career center visit, students often take advantage of an additional appointment before bringing in their materials for peers to critique. Similarly, students often return to the career center after receiving instructor feedback.

APPLYING FOR POSITIONS AND SUCCEEDING ON THE JOB

In addition to resumés and cover letters, students learn to interview effectively. As with their written materials, they first listen to a lecture covering the behavioral interview. Example prompts from this type of interview include “describe a time when you solved a complex problem.” Despite the ubiquity of this type of interview, many students are not aware that their narratives should have a specific purpose—that is, revealing competence in an aspect of job performance.⁴ The lecture also covers other

Beyond the core course materials and at the end of the course, students spend time with the instructor and other department members exploring the LinkedIn profiles of alumni. Through this task, students learn about other graduates who made similar choices in college and had similar experiences yet pursued a range of careers. Learning about political science alumni integrates this specific course into political science training more generally by linking recent graduates with current students. Other iterations of the course—potentially with more administrative involvement—may even attempt to build an alumni network for majors. Connections between recent and current students can integrate the political science major into post-college life and demonstrate to majors how many careers for which their training has prepared them.

CONCLUSION

Support from the department has been important for this course. Departmental administrators helped to market the course with emails to majors and posters placed around campus. Faculty members who want to pitch such a course to their department may highlight the additional opportunities for engagement with students who already have decided on a political science major and the potential to reach those who are less familiar with the field. Support from the department also is essential for helping faculty members to understand that they have the expertise and capacity to offer this training. Ideally, instructors teaching a similar course would have worked outside of academia. However, for those whose career has been entirely within the university, there are many resources available on the career center websites of many universities, including how-to guides for preparing important career materials.

Positive anecdotes are no substitute for systematic analysis; however, those who have taken the professional-development course described in this article reported that they were better motivated to think about what they want to do with their career and how they can advance it. Researchers argue that “the social sciences face a marketing problem because these ‘softer’ job skills often are compared unfavorably to job skills such as quantitative reasoning or specific scientific knowledge such as engineering” (Smith and McConaughy 2021). When political

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common interview questions, including negative questions. In a subsequent class meeting, students reconsider the position for which they prepared their resumé and draft cover letter. They prepare and ask one another interview questions as if they were hiring for those positions.

The final aim of the course is to help students succeed on the job. One way to accomplish this is to work on public speaking in the types of settings that people are likely to encounter in their career. To that end, students make a final presentation without using slides. Each student receives a different case study that documents successes and failures in the working world.⁵ They present the key lessons from their individually assigned studies to the class. Some are more lighthearted (e.g., about the pitfalls of an unregulated Twitter account) and others are more serious (e.g., how to deal with a bad supervisor when you cannot quit your job).

science departments work to help students find a meaningful career, they may highlight these efforts to resolve the marketing problem and attract more students. Future work should examine how political science career-development courses impact outcomes for students and for department enrollments.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The ideal size of this course is fewer than 20 students, which facilitates engagement between students and guest speakers. Grading is pass–fail and, as a result, the assignments are designed to not take time away from other substantive course-work. A version of the syllabus is available on APSA's Educate Platform (<https://educate.apsanet.org/resource/05-05-2022/professionalization-in-political-science-course-syllabus>).
2. For example, one guest speaker highlighted the benefits of learning how to work with pivot tables in Excel for exploring and presenting data.
3. Students quickly screen several resumés with the goal of understanding the importance of quantitative information in them.
4. The behavioral interview is a structured approach to asking about how potential hires have handled situations in the past, and it has been researched widely in psychology and management studies (Motowidlo et al. 1992).
5. These are drawn from several sources, including outlets such as the *Harvard Business Review*.

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