My last update was right before the Teaching and Learning Conference in Albuquerque in February of this year. Wow! How our lives and our profession have changed since that time. Many of us are still reeling from the aftershocks of the COVID-19 Pandemic and working toward navigating this new environment in which we find ourselves.

In September, we held the “virtual” annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. First, I want to thank APSA for putting together an amazing conference with very few glitches. For a conference of this size, that is nothing short of a miracle.

The Political Science Section business meeting was held on Friday evening with good attendance. I want to thank Maureen Feeley and Matthew Platt (2020 Program Chairs) for all of their hard work in putting together an outstanding selection of panels, workshops and roundtables and being able to switch gears so late in the planning process. There were over 700 who registered for the Teaching and Learning Conference at APSA this year! Co-chairs Jyl Josephson and Amber Dickinson along with their committee (Marcus Allen, Megan Becker, Bethany Blackstone, Josh Franco and Robert Glover) also did an outstanding job after having to change course in the middle of planning to put together a great day of learning for all of us. Mark Carl Rom and Rachel Bzostek Walker have agreed to serve as the 2021 Program Chairs and let’s hope that we are all in Seattle in person for that conference.

The highlight of the meeting was the presentation of our awards.

The following were the recipients:

Dear Section:
Craig L. Brians Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research & Mentoring – Emily Sydnor from Southern University, Shamira Gelbman from Wabash University, Michael Binder from the University of North Florida, and Malliga Och from Idaho State University.


Distinguished Service Award – Alison Rios Millett McCartney

Lifetime Achievement Award – E. Fletcher McClellan

Congratulations to all of these award winners. We extend our thanks to Donald Gooch for his service on the executive board and we welcome Cherie Strachan to the board. The meeting ended with some words from John Ishiyama, incoming President-Elect to APSA Council. And we also congratulate Michelle Deardorff who will be serving as Vice President to APSA Council. And finally, congratulations to Erin Richards who received the 2020 APSA Community College Faculty Award. What an awesome section we have!

With all of the upheaval of 2020, I would like to reflect on some of the positives. There were three roundtables/panels devoted to rethinking the Political Science major and how our discipline has responded to the COVID-19 crisis during the APSA Conference. It appears that we have learned more than we thought possible – we have moved classes online and we have responded to the needs of our students. We have adjusted and embraced this new technology that has been forced upon us. We have been given the time to rethink not only how we teach, but what we need to teach. Higher education may have changed, but I firmly believe that we will emerge from this pandemic stronger and better.

Stay well, safe and sane!

Terry

The Teacher-Scholar Column

Rethinking the Role of the University in Promoting Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Elizabeth A. Bennion, Indiana University South Bend, ebennion@iusb.edu

As a political scientist, and teacher-scholar, I am eager to use my research and teaching skills to equip my students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences they need to be informed, engaged voters and community members. As director of our campus American Democracy Project (ADP), I am eager to extend my reach beyond my own classroom in ways that benefit the campus and broader community.

The ADP views college campuses as “stewards of place” that both serve the community and are part of it. There are many ways to fulfill this mission, including working with P-12 schools, promoting community and economic development, and promoting widespread service learning using community leaders as co-educators while focusing on community-defined needs.

Another way for colleges and universities to fulfill their broader public purpose is to make our space more public and to promote democratic learning and engagement that brings the community to the campus and the campus to the community. Such activities can take place on campus, throughout the community, and online.

What if every public university thought of themselves and their faculty, staff, and students as engaged citizens and community members? What if each college and university placed the widespread development of civic knowledge, skills, and engagement at the heart of its mission – in order to improve the lives of people in the
region? What if the university saw its resources as public resources and did more to encourage the public to utilize these resources to promote civic learning and democratic engagement? For example:

- Instead of focusing on classroom-based (practice) activities designed to equip tuition-paying students with critical thinking and deliberation skills, what if faculty incorporated public events and “open classrooms” into all courses to allow students and non-students to deliberate together about the issues that matter most to the local community?iv

- What if campuses nationwide became the site of local, state, and national political debates? What if colleges worked with diverse community partners to host candidate forums and debates for all contested races on the ballot, allowing voters to compare candidates side-by-side in live (and live broadcasted) public events?v

- What if the campuses continued to host town hall meetings with elected officials between election cycles?

- What if campuses volunteered to serve as polling places and to work with county election administrators to train students to work the polls?vi

- What if campuses developed civic leadership academies, working with municipal, county, state, and national political leaders and community activists to equip people with the combination of knowledge and skills they need to make a meaningful difference in their communities? Such academies could be held on campus, at community locations, and online.vii

- What if campuses hosted free campaign colleges for local citizens from all demographic and partisan backgrounds to demystify the process and promote competitive elections in all jurisdictions nationwide?

- What if campuses became central meeting places for civic organizations of all kinds? What if working with such organizations became an expected part of what it meant to be a member of both the community and the university, with diverse and interdisciplinary groups of students, faculty, and staff joining others across our communities to address the “wicked problems” that defy easy solutions and require all of us to harness our collective experience, energy, wisdom?

These are just a few ideas for making our campuses more public and serving a broader public mission. Such campuses would become environments where students not only learn about democracy and community engagement, but also live democracy and practice engagement. Political scientists possess the knowledge and skills required to lead these efforts, in collaboration with other faculty, staff, students, and civic leaders outside the academy. Opening our campuses and classrooms to the public is one way to act as stewards of place and to fulfill the public purpose of higher education: bettering our communities and educating the next generation of engaged civic leaders.

Community College Voices

Using Elections to Teach Civic Engagement

T. M. Sell, Highline College, tmsell@highline.edu

Every fall, I build parts of my political science classes around the elections. That may seem obvious, but I believe it can work in a way that helps get students to care. All of our circumstances are different – different students, different communities, different levels of interest in politics and government. At
Highline College, south of Seattle, our political science classes generally fill up with students who are technically still in high school. They come via a state program called Running Start, which lets high school juniors and seniors take college courses on the state’s nickel.

After a generation of K-12 education focused on getting students to pass standardized tests, the runners, as I call them, are not only very young, they’re also ill-prepared. They’re intelligent and capable, but generally not quite ready for college. I see my job as helping them to get there. Above all, they are generally not political science majors and they haven’t really learned how government might affect them. They’re only taking political science at Highline to fulfill their high school civics requirement.

Washington state has elections every year: Statewide and legislative races in even-numbered years; local races in odd-numbered years.

This provides me with a couple of opportunities. First, I bring in a steady stream of guests. As we’re in a highly populated suburban area, we’ve got lots of nearby legislators, city councilmembers and mayors, water commissioners and school board members who are happy to come speak.

Many of them are candidates, either running for office or seeking re-election. They’re not all great speakers, or even completely rational (one candidate said she was in favor of gun control but then she also worried about something like “Red Dawn.” Even my students later remarked, “that’s a movie.”)

But that’s rather the point. I want them to see who’s on the ballot, and what can happen if you don’t vote.

That’s only step one, however. They all have to write a paper comparing two local candidates seeking the same office in that election. We walk through what kinds of questions they should ask, and where they might get information: websites, media reports, and trying to interview the candidates through any means available. If there are any candidate forums, I make sure the students know about them.

We also talk about the things candidates often say, and whether they make any sense. Students often initially are excited by candidates who vow to “fight” for one cause or another, and who promise to throw down the gauntlet in front of the tyranny of the mayor until they get what they want. But then we talk about how politics actually works, and whether that kind of approach gets you very far.

Naturally, we also spend time talking about the nature and roles of the governments involved in these elections – the legislature, the city council, the school board – whatever’s on the ballot. I try to be sure they have the context to understand what this particular government does – and why there’s no point in calling the mayor if you’re unhappy with the schools.

What I have found, particularly with younger students, is that if there’s anything I want them to do, I will probably have to teach them how to do it. So we spend some time on how to write a good essay, for example. Any number of them will have been taught to begin with “In this essay, I’m going to tell you…” To which I respond, “I know! I made the assignment!”

Generally speaking, they need help with how to do research, what questions to ask, and how to think critically about what people say in politics. There’s some heavy lifting involved, but it tends to pay off in the end. For example, one local mayor tends to go off on some wild tangents when he comes to talk about city government. And then, inevitably, one of my students will raise a hand and ask, “Can you please talk about the city? We have to write a paper about this.” In the end, when I ask them a question about it, nearly all of them will say the same thing: We need to get out and vote. And that gets me through all the way to the next term.

**Featured Essays**
Breaking it Down: Writing a Doctoral Dissertation Prospectus

Susan E. Baer, Contributing Faculty Member, School of Public Policy and Administration, Walden University, susan.baer@waldenu.edu

I teach and mentor doctoral students who are writing qualitative dissertations in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Walden University. Students often feel overwhelmed throughout the dissertation process, beginning with the initial phase of writing their prospectus. To attempt to make the process of writing a dissertation prospectus more manageable for students, I have found that one useful approach is to divide the prospectus into sections and ask students to write one section at a time. Then, I provide feedback on each individual section, and the student makes needed revisions to each section. When completed, she moves forward to write the next section and so on until the prospectus is finalized.

At Walden, this process begins with the student identifying a research problem and writing a problem statement. Often a new doctoral student has a general topic of interest that is broad and needs to be much narrower in focus. To narrow the focus and identify a specific research problem to study, students must review the existing literature on their topic of interest and identify a gap in the literature. Asking students to review relevant literature and write an annotated bibliography may help them to narrow their focus and identify a research problem. The students must ultimately write and rewrite a draft problem statement.

After completing their problem statement, students need to write the often elusive research question or questions for their qualitative dissertation study. The student’s research question should flow logically from her problem statement. Students need to consider multiple factors when writing a research question including proper phrasing, assessing the feasibility of addressing the research question, and possible Institutional Review Board (IRB) implications, among others.

When a suitable research question is found, the student next writes the purpose section of her prospectus. This section connects the research problem being addressed and the focus of the study. Again, the student writes and revises this section until all instructor feedback is addressed.

Students next must find and select an appropriate theoretical or conceptual framework for their dissertation study. Selecting an appropriate framework is crucial, because it grounds the dissertation study and serves as a blueprint of sorts for the study. To identify an appropriate framework, students must search and review the existing literature. In certain cases, I ask students to consult a university librarian if additional assistance is needed. The selected framework should help the student to answer her research question.

The student must next write a significance section for the prospectus. Issues the student must address in this section include explaining why the study is important, how the study will begin to fill a gap in the literature, and how the study’s findings might lead to positive social change.

Students next must determine the nature or approach of their qualitative study. The research design selected should best address the study’s research question. Then, students write the possible types and sources of data section as well as the limitations, challenges, and/or barriers section of the prospectus.

The students must also write and include a background section in the prospectus that consists of ten relevant annotated journal articles published within the last five years. This section must also include keywords or phrases searched and databases used. Finally, students need to include a references list using the most updated APA style as well as a title page.

Dividing the dissertation prospectus into smaller sections and writing one section at a time in a
logical order and addressing all instructor feedback for each section allows students to complete the prospectus in a more manageable way. This method might reduce students’ anxiety and sense of feeling overwhelmed, and it has the potential to enhance student success.

**Should Political Science Professors Remain Non-partisan in the Classroom?**

*Mark Carl Rom, Associate Professor of Government and Public Policy, Georgetown University, romm@georgetown.edu*

There is never a dull time to teach courses on American politics, but presidential election years are even more exciting: the students are engaged and the stakes are high. But how should professors talk about politics during the election in 2020, and during the highly polarized and partisan years that are sure to follow? Should professors stick to the science of politics, or should we be more overtly political?

Conservatives already tend to believe that professors are not politically neutral, and that they seek to promote Democratic candidates and liberal policies. According to the Pew Research Center, 4-of-5 Republicans believed that professors “are bringing their political and social views into the classroom” (Fingerhut 2017). (Only 17 percent of Democrats had the same belief.) Given that academia “is one of the most liberal occupations in the U.S.” (Gross 2016), it requires no stretch of the imagination to infer that these political and social views favor liberal principles and Democratic positions. Almost 3-in-4 Republicans believe that higher education is going in the wrong direction, and almost 60 percent of Republicans hold that “colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country” (Brown 2018).

That higher education, including the political science profession, is dominated by liberals does raise important questions about the potential for liberal bias (Rom 2019). Yet I wish that those who believe that higher education is contributing to the country’s woes by spreading liberal views could sit in on a typical political science class. I’ve interviewed political science professors around the country, from community colleges to Ivy League universities, about how they teach and grade their students. Without exception, the professors make statements like:

I don’t teach my students what to think: I teach them how to think.

I don’t care how my students vote. I care that they vote.

I know I’ve succeeded if, at the end of the semester, the students can’t guess my partisanship.

These sentiments are genuine, and I share them. Professional norms call for us to be non-partisan in the classroom, and I believe that most political scientists strive to abide by those norms while they teach. In the American Political Science Association’s *Guide to Professional Ethics*, the first statement in the section on “Responsibilities in the Classroom and to Students” is “Academic political scientists must be very careful not to impose their partisan views, conventional or otherwise, upon students or colleagues” (APSA 2012: 11). Because ignoring ethical guidelines, or deliberately violating them, may now seem acceptable (Bookbinder, et al. n.d.), it can be easy for the Ben Shapiros of the world to scoff at this claim (Shapiro 2004). Those who wish to believe that professors are mad libs are unlikely to be persuaded, even when professors explicitly seek to be unbiased (Rom and Musgrave 2014).

For most of the nearly three decades I have been teaching political science courses, I have tried my best to live up to the APSA’s ethical standards, and it was pretty easy to do so by preaching partisan symmetry. As I taught it, both Republicans and Democrats believed that
they were acting in the public interest, while the other party served special interests. Partisans believed that they were on the side of justice and truth, while their opponents were ignorant, evil, or corrupt. Republicans believed that lower taxes, less regulation, and more military spending were beneficial to the national interest; Democrats believed the opposite.

Moreover, scholars know that “All presidents, no matter their partisan differences, their personal backgrounds, their leadership styles, or their rhetorical flourishes, want all the power they can acquire” (Howell 2015: ix). They sometimes lie (Pfiffner 2004). They have a love-hate relationship with the news media (Frantzich 2019). They reward those who are loyal or otherwise beneficial to them (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). All Presidents have engaged in various forms of misconduct (Banner 2019). In these ways and many others, Trump has acted presidentially, to the extreme.

Many of the Trump administration’s policies were wrong-headed and needlessly cruel, I believed, but I did not teach those personal beliefs and it was not my role to do so. Instead I would offer to my students that “The Trump administration seeks to dramatically reduce immigration by tightening restrictions and increasing punishments; the Democrats oppose these policies and favor greater protections and fewer restrictions.” The Trump administration was grossly irresponsible in its climate change policies, in my view, but I portrayed its differences with the Democrats as a predictable matter of competing policy priorities and interests. As I reflect on my continued teaching of undergraduate courses on the US political system, I will continue to “be very careful” not to impose my partisan beliefs on my students. But in the fall of 2020, for the first time ever, I made them quite clear: A vote for candidates and parties who seek to degrade and disrupt the institutions vital to well-functioning representative democracies is a vote against the grand American experiment in self-governance.

President Trump’s use of disinformation to discredit and distort the vote was, in fact, the very action that pushed me away from my non-partisan obligations. As with other policy issues, I had long framed the differences between Republicans and Democrats over voting rights as policy disagreements based on valid moral concerns. Democrats cared most about expanding access to the vote; Republicans cared most about ensuring the integrity of the vote. Both parties (coincidentally!) supported policies that they believed would help them on Election Day. The Republican position did not seem unreasonable to my students, who overwhelmingly supported photo ID
requirements and who engaged in lively debates over what were reasonable voting policies. [Redacted] students find it hard to believe that anyone actually lacks a photo ID -- they overwhelmingly come from affluent families (New York Times n.d.) -- and they always overwhelmingly reject my hypothetical proposal for universal (every citizen, no matter how young!) voting rights.

Trump ruined this debate, as he has so much else. He lied, again and again, about voter fraud (Farley 2020). He sought to undermine voting-by-mail rhetorically and by appointing a crony to run the US Postal Service (Hasen 2020a; see also Hasen 2020b). In office, he degraded and disparaged our electoral system, questioning its legitimacy: “the only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged” (Chalfant 2020). Moreover, there is no reason to expect that Trump will stop attacking the legitimacy of our electoral system. Before he was elected, he was a leading proponent of the ‘birther’ conspiracy theory that President Obama was not a US citizen. During the run-up to the 2020 election, he repeatedly tried to sabotage public confidence in the outcome, if not the outcome itself. As Gellman (2020) put it: “Let us not hedge about one thing. Donald Trump may win or lose, but he will never concede. Not under any circumstance. Not during the Interregnum and not afterward. If compelled in the end to vacate his office, Trump will insist from exile, that the contest was rigged.” In action after action, Trump sought to corrupt other institutions and norms vital to our form of government: the separation of powers, the criminal justice system, bureaucratic competence and neutrality, and basic (but essential) respect for the opposition.

As a party, Republicans disavowed none of this. On voting, Republicans can no longer credibly claim that their main concern is voter integrity. It’s voter suppression. Trump was clear about this. When the House passed legislation providing $3.6 billion to enhance “election resiliency” (Kilgore 2020) Trump in opposition stated “They had levels of voting, that if you ever agreed to it you’d never have a Republican elected in this country again” (Blake 2020). In virtually every identifiable state-level debate and action in recent years (but see Ciaramella 2020), Republicans have sought to make it harder to vote by purging voter rolls (Vasilogrambros 2019), limiting early voting (Neumann 2020), reducing the number of polling places (Leadership Conference Education Fund 2019) or drop boxes, and overruling the public will (Totenberg 2020). The Republican Party stands with Trump in seeking to subvert our electoral system to its benefit: “One [Republican] party seems to be systemically making it harder to vote and taking other steps that undermine the integrity of the electoral process” (Bacon 2020). “In present-day politics, we have one party that consistently seeks advantage in depriving the other party’s adherents of the right to vote” (Gellman 2020). Barring an entirely unpredictable change of heart, one party will continue to do so long after the 2020 election.

Trumpism, and the party that now represents those interests, repudiates the values of those political scientists who believe that democratic norms and institutions are worth preserving. Most of us nonetheless have remained true to the principle that we should remain non-partisan in the classroom. Trump -- the person and the party -- have by their words and actions negated that obligation. I will still invite the partisan critics of higher education to my (virtual) classroom -- or the classroom of the thousands of devoted political science instructors -- to see for themselves how we teach politics. If they do come, it will be an honor to show them that I promote genuine American values: “I plan to vote for the party and the candidates that seek to win votes, not suppress them. I will oppose those who attempt to destabilize democracy, and support those who plan to strengthen it.” For the first time in 2020, I encouraged my students to vote the same way, and I will continue to do so. With luck, one day those statements will again be seen as non-partisan.


Washington Post, April 8.  

Nashville: WND Books.

The Leadership Conference Education Fund.  


https://pew.org/2Ndx2vh

Announcements  
Archived issues of The Political Science Educator can be found here:  
http://community.apsanet.org/TeachingCivicEngagement/additionalteachingresources/new-item

Please send any article submissions or announcements for future newsletters to Bobbi Gentry at bgentry@bridgewater.edu.  Submission deadlines are June 15 for the Summer/Fall newsletter, and December 15 for the Winter/Spring newsletter.  Contributions may be as brief as 200 – 500 hundred words, but should not exceed approximately 1000 words, and should use APSA citation style. Please include "PS Educator submission" in the subject line of your email. Thank you!

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Bobbi Gentry, Newsletter Editor

Learn more about the American Democracy Project here: https://www.aascu.org/programs/ADP/
ii An interesting piece on becoming a Steward of Place is available here: https://aascu.org/freepubs/OperationalizingStewardsofPlace.pdf

iii This essay is a lightly revised version of a “provocation” I submitted as part of a “Gallery of Wicked Provocations” at the 2020 meeting of the Society for Values in Higher Education. My team of American Democracy Project directors at regional IU campuses addressed the topic of “Higher Education and Democracy After 2020.”

iv The National Issues Forum provides free training guides, moderator tips, discussion launcher videos, and issues guides for organizations to host public deliberations on a wide range of local and national policy issues. You can access most materials for free here: https://www.nifi.org/

v Footage of sample local, state, and national candidate forums and debates hosted by the American Democracy Project of Indiana University South Bend and local League of Women Voters chapters is available here: https://clas.iusb.edu/centers/adp/candidate-archives.html

vi Like most states, Indiana, where I teach, faces a poll worker shortage. IUPUI professor Tim Koponen has argued that college students could be the solution. You can read his op-ed, available on the Secretary of State’s website, here: https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/HSHD_LTE.pdf

vii For more information, including suggested topics and organizing advice see: Elizabeth A. Bennion, 2018. “Hosting a Civic Leadership Academy on Your Campus.” The Political Science Educator 22 (2): 2-6, available here http://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/political-science-educator/). A complete video archives of the Civic Leadership Academy series is available here: https://clas.iusb.edu/centers/adp/civic-leadership-academy-video-archives.html