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Educational Affairs/APSA
1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

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Objectives of the Undergraduate Curriculum

by Peter Steinberger, Reed College

While many political scientists have been concerned about teaching methods, teaching materials, and modes of teacher evaluation, relatively few have considered the more general question of the undergraduate political science curriculum itself. Specifically, what *kinds* of courses should we be teaching, what role should such courses play in a liberal arts education, and what factors should determine the overall structure of the political science curriculum at the undergraduate level?

These questions relate further to the practical question of staffing a small department of political science. When vacancies arise, or when there's an opportunity to expand in a modest way, one is confronted with certain basic choices. In most circumstances, we confront these choices by thinking in terms of fields within our discipline. We sit down, determine just what areas of political life are currently being covered in our department, make a list of those areas we have unavoidably neglected, rank-order those, then define job vacancies and staffing priorities accordingly. I would doubt that there are many departments, small or large, that operate in any other fashion. The operative principle here is *coverage*. The more we cover, the better are we serving the needs of our students and our profession. If there are gaps in our curriculum, we should try to fill those gaps; the more we can fill, the better. In my own department, we talk with some pride about how much of the field the three of us are able to cover.

However, I reject the notion that our primary responsibility is to fill substantive gaps in our course offerings. Rather, we should be insuring that our students receive exposure to the basic intellectual strategies of the discipline, and that they have ample opportunity to experience those strategies in various ways, for example, by reading about them, talking about them, and actually us-

ing them in a research setting of some kind. And if our correct focus is on strategies of inquiry, then it does not much matter which set of facts we choose to deal with. If we are interested in teaching about sociological analysis as a way of looking at the world, then this can be accomplished equally well by focusing on Congress or the presidency or city government or public bureaucracy.

I wish to argue that thinking about staffing in terms of covering as many fields as possible reflects a fundamentally distorted view of the undergraduate political science curriculum and perhaps of the discipline itself. It casts practical questions in a light which has significant implications for the way we think about ourselves as political scientists, as teachers, and perhaps even as scholars. Indeed, it seems to me that basic curricular questions should be addressed not by looking at sub-fields within the discipline, but by considering more generally the purposes of a liberal arts education and the place of political science therein.

Perhaps then we might begin by turning to the tried and true formula that the purpose of political science is to produce good citizens. This formula provides the putative answer to the question, why is it important to give our students a feel for the processes of political life? It is important, so the story goes, because they will become better citizens—more sensitive to the realities of political life, better able to process political information, more attuned to the principles of the Constitution, and the like. Now I would argue that this formula contains the dubious premise that courses in political science can perform this function as well as, or better than, other of life's experiences. The assumption that you have to go to college in order to be a good citizen is one that we would all reject; and I for one would just as soon place my trust with the

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Critical Thinking and Clear Writing

by Anne F. Lee
West Oahu College

As part of an on-going effort at West Oahu College (a small, liberal arts, upper-division campus of the University of Hawaii) I am experimenting with ways to help my political science students improve their ability to think critically and communicate clearly. For some time we have been aware of a large number of students having difficulties in writing and critical thinking. We have made an informal and voluntary commitment to use writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) with faculty participating in workshops and conferring with the writing instructor who coordinates our WAC program.¹

In-coming students must now produce a writing proficiency sample which is analyzed, returned with numerous comments, and results in students being urged to take a writing class if there are serious problems. A writing lab is offered several times a week and students are free to drop in for help. A number of my students have taken advantage of this lab by bringing rough drafts of papers there to improve their ability to articulate.

Initially I informed students (on the course outline and during the first lecture of the semester) that written material would be graded on the basis of substance *and* clarity of writing. This was a big step for me because I had always hesitated to tell students that their work would be evaluated on more than just substance, i.e., getting the right words, concepts, or facts. I could just hear the comments, "But this is political science, not English!" As expected, some students resist and whine. But I am now comfortable in explaining why clarity of writing is as important as the substance and in fact that the two cannot be separated. Perhaps the most persuasive argument that I use goes something like this: "I know that you have good ideas and are perhaps a genius. But how can I possibly discover that genius if I

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