

Learning through Peer Reviewing and Publishing in the *Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*: Twenty Years Later

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ABSTRACT

The *Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics (PSAJ)*, sponsored by the Pi Sigma Alpha National Honor Society, was founded in 2001 at Purdue University. After 20 years, much has changed in undergraduate research and publishing, but the benefits of producing a peer-reviewed journal remain the same. Undergraduate research has increased in prominence, and the journal has modernized to meet these transformations. This article describes the history, purpose, and operations of the *PSAJ*. Most important, a survey of former Editorial Board members, Pi Sigma Alpha Faculty Chapter Advisors, and published authors in the journal reveal attitudes toward operating an undergraduate journal, using undergraduate research in the college classroom, and publishing in a peer-reviewed journal, respectively. We conclude with calls to continue to encourage undergraduate research and to assign published undergraduate research in upper-level courses.

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Undergraduate research plays a more important role in higher education than ever before (e.g., Douglas and Zhao 2012; Webber, Laird, and BrckaLorenz 2013). Universities and departments are investing in improving and increasing undergraduate research opportunities, with many establishing dedicated centers for undergraduate research (e.g., *Syracuse University News* 2018). Numerous universities allow students with well-executed and cogent research to submit proposals to receive monetary support for research and travel funds. The National Science Foundation also acknowledges the value of undergraduate work by providing research funding via the Research Experiences for Undergraduates program, which seeks to promote the “active research participation by undergraduate students” (National Science Foundation 2020). Along with monetary support, universities have taken steps to ensure that undergraduates receive faculty advice and reviews by creating learning spaces at low cost (Snow, DeCosmo, and Shokair 2010) and by considering faculty mentoring of

undergraduate research in promotion and tenure decisions. Of course, the increasing focus and support of undergraduate research results in increasing output of undergraduate scholarship.

954 manuscripts submitted between fall 2013 and spring 2020, the plurality (32%) originated from the southern region of the United States; 3.4% were international submissions.

The PSAJ is a student-run, peer-reviewed, and faculty-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing exceptional undergraduate research in all subfields of political science.

As a result, numerous regional and state conferences (e.g., the Midwest Political Science Association) are offering more opportunities for undergraduate research on panels and poster sessions. Other conferences include *Posters on the Hill* and *National Conferences on Undergraduate Research*. The Pi Sigma Alpha (PSA) National Research Conference, specifically for political science research, increased from 22 undergraduate paper presentations in 2014 to more than 100 in 2020. These conferences provide a space for students to experience the academic world. By presenting their original research, they can learn how to communicate their work, receive and incorporate useful feedback, develop their ability to ask thoughtful questions, and network with students and faculty at other schools.

As Cox and Kent (2018) reported, there is an increase in available undergraduate journals in political science. Indeed, the American Political Science Association (APSA) lists approximately 15 undergraduate journals, including *Ilios: Journal of Political Science and Philosophy*, *Compass*, *Journal of Politics & Society*, and *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science*. Similar to conference presentations, undergraduates who submit their work to a journal gain additional experience in the academy by acquainting themselves with the peer-review process, responding to reviews, and making revisions. Moreover, published undergraduate work contributes to the overall body of political science research. The purpose of this article is to establish how undergraduate research impacts both the authors and the field of political science as a whole.

HISTORY OF THE PI SIGMA ALPHA UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF POLITICS

The *PSAJ* was founded in the spring of 2001 by the Delta Omega Chapter of PSA at Purdue University (for more information, see Bauer et al. 2009). The *PSAJ* is a student-run, peer-reviewed, and faculty-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing exceptional undergraduate research in all subfields of political science. Between 2001 and 2020, the *PSAJ* published 37 issues (biannually in the fall and spring), including four to six original manuscripts in each issue.

Since its inception, the *PSAJ* has been hosted by five universities, with a Faculty Editor, a student Editorial Board, and a Faculty Advisory Board selected from the university's PSA chapter. Purdue University first hosted the *PSAJ* from 2004 to 2006, followed by Union College (2007–2010), The College of William & Mary (2010–2013), Oakland University (2013–2020), and currently Elon University (2020–2023). Host schools are selected through a competitive proposal process.

During the past 20 years, the *PSAJ* has published 163 manuscripts, representing authors from small liberal arts colleges to large public institutions (table 1). Since fall 2013, the *PSAJ* has broadened its scope, receiving manuscript submissions from across the United States and the world (table 2). Among the

Of the 11 institutions with the most publications (i.e., institutions with three or more publications, as noted in table 1), all have active PSA chapters. Although being a PSA member is not a prerequisite for submitting to the journal, these schools likely receive more information about it and therefore submit at a higher frequency than schools without a chapter.

The *PSAJ* receives manuscripts across the discipline's subfields. Of the 954 manuscripts submitted since 2013, the American politics (46%) and international relations (40%) subfields are the most common, with a smaller number from the comparative politics and political theory subfields (table 3). The *PSAJ* also attracts research that uses diverse methodologies, including case studies, large-N empirical analyses, interviews, content analyses, and experimental designs.

Male and female students submit work to the *PSAJ* at roughly the same rate. This is evidence that gender does not play a significant role in undergraduate participation in professional-level research. Author submissions to the *PSAJ* from fall 2013 to spring 2020 were from 49.1% women and 50.9% men. Compared to the overall average of women in the political science teaching profession, which is approximately 29% (American Association of University Professors 2019), the *PSAJ* has more gender equality in submitters (see also Stegmaier, Palmer, and van Assendelft 2011).¹ However, the gender imbalance for institutions in political science is 52.8% male, which follows more closely to our distribution (Data USA 2020).

EDITORIAL STRUCTURE AND PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

Throughout its 20-year history, the editorial structure of the *PSAJ* has varied, usually including three to five student Editors and Deputy Editors (in outreach, social media, copyediting, technology, scheduling, and content); a 15-student-member Editorial Board of political science majors and minors from the host institution (primarily or exclusively PSA members); and a 10- to 20-member Faculty Advisory Board. The Faculty Advisory Board includes political science professors from the host institution. It has expanded to include external faculty from college and universities from across the United States. Its role is to review manuscripts and make publication recommendations to the Editorial Board.

In the early fall and in the spring, the Editorial Board distributes a call for manuscripts via mass emailing to political science departments across the country and to PSA Faculty Chapter Advisors. In recent years, the Editorial Board also has actively advertised manuscript calls via social media posts and at undergraduate poster sections at regional and national political science conferences. All submissions are received via email. During Oakland University's seven years as host, manuscript submissions increased from 29 in fall 2013 to a peak of 109 in spring 2018. On average, about 68 manuscripts were submitted during this period.

Table 1
Institutional Affiliations of Published Authors, Fall 2001–Spring 2020

Allegheny College	Samford University (2)
Appalachian State University	Santa Clara University
Arizona State University (2)	Seton Hall University
Baldwin Wallace University	Sewanee University
Bates College	Southern Utah University
Beloit College (2)	Southwestern University (2)
Calvin College	St. Lawrence University (2)
Case Western Reserve University	St. John's University
Cedarville University	St. Olaf College (3)
Centre College of Kentucky	Stanford University (2)
Christopher Newport University (2)	Stetson University (2)
Colby College	Susquehanna University
Colgate University	Swarthmore College
College of Wooster	Temple University
Connecticut College (2)	Texas Christian University (2)
Creighton University	The College of William & Mary (7)
DePaul University	The George Washington University (2)
Dickinson College (2)	Truman State University
Dominican University of California	Tufts University
Drury University	Union College
Duke University (4)	United States Air Force Academy
Elmhurst College	University of Chicago
Emory University	University of Cincinnati
Florida State University	University of Georgia (2)
Fordham University	University of Illinois
Furman University	University of Kansas
Georgetown University	University of Manitoba
Georgia College and State University	University of Memphis
Grand Valley State University	University of Michigan
Gustavus Adolphus College (3)	University of Minnesota, Morris (2)
Harvard University	University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Hendrix College	University of New Mexico
Hunter College, CUNY (2)	University of North Carolina
Illinois Wesleyan University	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Indiana University	University of North Dakota
Indiana University South Bend	University of Notre Dame (2)
John Cabot University	University of Pennsylvania (2)
Kent State University	University of Pittsburgh
Linfield College	University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown
Louisiana State University	University of Richmond (3)
Macalester College (3)	University of South Florida
Macaulay Honors College at Lehman College	University of Southern California (3)
Malone College	University of Tennessee, Chattanooga
Marquette University	University of the South
Mary Baldwin University	University of Virginia (4)

Table 1 (Continued)

Montclair State University	University of Washington
Northeastern Illinois University	University of Western Ontario, Canada
Northern Arizona University	University of Wisconsin (4)
Northern Kentucky University	University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point
Oberlin College	Vanderbilt University (3)
Ohio State University (2)	Wabash College
Oklahoma State University	Wake Forest University
Princeton University (2)	Washington University in St. Louis (2)
Purdue University (8)	Wayne State College
Randolph–Macon College (2)	Wellesley College
Rice University (2)	Western Kentucky University
Roosevelt University	Yale University (2)
Saint Anselm College (2)	Yeshiva University
Saint Louis University	

Note: Based on 168 manuscripts published in the PSAJ between fall 2001 and spring 2020.

Table 2
Regional Representation of Submitted Manuscripts (Fall 2013–Spring 2020)

Percentage of Manuscripts from Different Regions of the United States and the World

Northeast (United States)	28.4%
South (United States)	32.3%
Midwest (United States)	23.7%
West (United States)	11.9%
Canada	1.9%
Other: Japan, Turkey, Sweden, Italy, Austria, Guam, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Australia	<1%

Notes: The region is based on the institutional affiliation as submitted by the manuscript author. For all institutions within the United States, the geographical location was based on the regions as defined by the US Census Bureau (2020). All institutions outside of the United States were coded as their country.

Since 2001, the peer-review process has remained largely the same. Editorial Board members are divided into groups according to subfield, and at least four members review each manuscript. This ensures that manuscripts are reviewed by those with a solid knowledge and understanding of the research topics under review. First, each member evaluates the assigned manuscript based on its contribution to the discipline, originality, strength of the theory, appropriateness of method, support of main conclusions, and overall writing quality. Second, at weekly meetings, members discuss their assessment of their assigned manuscripts with their peer group. Third, the peer group presents to and discusses its final recommendation with the entire student Editorial Board. During the 2013–2020 period, the manuscript acceptance rate was 6.5%.

After deliberation and debate, manuscripts that do not meet the criteria are rejected. There are three primary reasons for

Table 3
Manuscript Topics/Fields Submitted to the Journal (Fall 2013–Spring 2020)

Subfield	Percentage
American Politics	46.1%
International Relations	40.3%
Comparative Politics	6.8%
Theory	4.7%
Political Economy	1.4%
Miscellaneous	0.5%
Legal	0.2%

Notes: Subtopics were determined based on manuscript titles. Papers including work on American presidents, US Congress, individual states, and media within the United States were coded as American Politics. Comparative Politics included research comparing two or more regimes, countries, or states. Theory manuscripts included philosophical theory, American political theory, or international relations theory. Political Economy included any economic theory or analysis of economic policies. Legal included court systems or the rule of law. Miscellaneous included research not defined.

manuscript rejection. First, the author’s research is not original or novel and, therefore, does not add to existing knowledge about the topic. Second, manuscripts are rejected when authors do not provide sufficient evidence to answer the question posed. The

Peer-reviewed undergraduate research journals create an opportunity for both the authors of the manuscripts and those reviewing them.

third most common issue preventing publication is that the quality of writing and organization is below publishable standards. Of course, some manuscripts are rejected because they simply are beyond the aim and scope of the *PSAJ*.

Each accepted manuscript is submitted to one Faculty Advisory Board member who reviews the manuscript according to set criteria and then recommends “publish,” “publish with revisions,” or “do not publish.” Members often decide to “publish with revision,” offering constructive comments and edits to the author. Editors communicate the faculty feedback to authors via email so they can revise their work.² The student Editors and Editorial Board make final decisions with advice from the Faculty Editor.

Manuscripts typically undergo multiple revisions to meet *PSAJ* standards. Student Editors and the Faculty Editor collaborate with authors to ensure a high-quality manuscript using *APSA Style Manual* format. In some cases, an author revises the manuscript three or more times. After it is submitted, the Faculty Editor reviews and approves the final manuscript and sends it to a third-party layout professional. Final manuscripts are compiled in a digital publishing platform (i.e., *issuu.com*) and uploaded to the *PSAJ* website (www.psajournal.org).

The Faculty Editor is a full-time faculty member who serves in a truly advisory role, ensuring that the Editorial Board reviews manuscripts in a professional and timely manner. The team of student Editors leads Editorial Board meetings. The Faculty Editor attends but only to answer occasional questions, usually regarding a manuscript’s methodology or originality. The Faculty Editor takes a more hands-on role in the final stages of the

editorial process, typically reading all manuscripts approved (i.e., “revise and resubmit”) by the Faculty Advisory Board member and making additional comments to the authors.³

THE JOURNAL AS A LEARNING TOOL FOR EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS

Peer-reviewed undergraduate research journals create an opportunity for both the authors of the manuscripts and those reviewing them. Editorial Board members are better able to understand the proper methods, terminology, and organization used in a research paper. To examine some of these pedagogical benefits, we surveyed 28 former student Editors and Deputy Editors, asking six open-ended questions about their experience as an Editorial Board leader, the skills they gained when conducting their duties, and how their editorial role influenced their career.⁴

Nine former Editors described the impact of their experience as one filled with opportunities to learn more about collaboration and leadership. As one former Editor noted: [the *PSAJ*] “...provided a leadership opportunity to lead thoughtful discussion and analysis.” Other Editors pointed out that the *PSAJ* improved their research skills and ability to publish manuscripts because it allowed them to communicate with other students and professors about how to structure and properly write a manuscript versus an in-class research paper. Their experience gave them knowledge and understanding of what a proper research paper looks like without com-

paring one’s work to that of a doctoral author. Serving as a student Editor motivates a student’s research and interest in the field.

One former student Editor credited “a lot of [their] willingness to submit manuscripts early in my [undergraduate] career with [the] understanding that I gained.” When asked about their most significant accomplishments derived from their work on the *PSAJ*, all commented on the ability to create an open and welcoming environment: it “...taught [them] a tremendous amount about humility.” We asked former Editors about their careers; their professions included professors of political science, work in international strategy firms, business owners, civil rights lawyers, and research strategists. Many noted that serving on the Editorial Board provided the opportunity to hone the essential skills that they have used throughout their career.

In early March 2020, 100 former and current Oakland University student Editorial Board members were contacted to complete 10 open-ended survey questions about their experience on the Board, whether their role influenced their research trajectory, and what skills they gained while serving.⁵ Sixteen former Editorial Board members responded, reporting that the experience allowed them to connect with faculty and other students in the political science department. Others spoke of how the experience improved their writing, allowed them to realize they could write and be published as an undergraduate, and taught them how to critically analyze manuscripts—even those by academics in their other courses. Additionally, Editorial Board members discussed that their experience gave them the confidence to present their research at conferences; they became better at identifying the essential pieces to speak about and more comfortable properly explaining their methodology.

A common thread throughout all responses was that the *PSAJ* exposed them to new topics and often provided insight into that in which they were most interested. That experience helped them choose the type of career or graduate program to pursue. Skills that former Editorial Board members reported they gained from the *PSAJ* included the ability to pay attention to detail, give constructive feedback, and effectively communicate with their peers and faculty. Former members have careers in local politics, nonprofits, and analyst positions, and many attend graduate or law school.

THE JOURNAL AS A LEARNING TOOL FOR AUTHORS

In addition to providing a learning opportunity for the host school's student editors, the *PSAJ* presents an important experience for submitting authors. To celebrate PSA's Centennial year, the Editorial Board published a special issue consisting of 12 exemplary manuscripts from the past two decades.⁶ This Centennial issue included the authors' perspectives and feedback on the impact of their published research. Overall, every author overwhelmingly emphasized that conducting and publishing their research in *PSAJ* helped them develop essential skills—particularly data analysis, critical thinking, and professional writing mastery—that they used in their career. One author stated, "Working on this paper...challenged me [to] develop my skills working with data and statistical analyses, and today, as a litigator, I frequently leverage these skills, analyzing expert reports and damages models." Another author noted, "Learning how to pursue a singular, novel question teaches valuable and transferable research skills." Similarly, another author stated, "I believe the deep thinking and critical-thinking skills involved in research are essential in both school and a career."

Several authors reported that their research project was a stepping-stone to graduate school. One author stated: "...my undergraduate research laid a very firm foundation for further research in my Master's program. I was already familiar with the process, which I believe made for better quality research." For some, authorship was the inspiration for pursuing a career in academia, as stated by one author: "This article was important to my career as it sparked my desire to conduct further research in the field of political science and taught me how the process of publishing could work." In general, authors reported that publishing their manuscript provided valuable experience because the process of conducting research helped them better understand other scientific studies and the world around them.

Authors have achieved fruitful careers in politics, academia, and other professions. Several pursued PhDs in political science at a multitude of schools and became professors themselves.

If students are exposed to undergraduate research articles, they can read a writing example from their peers and understand how to write for both a college and a professional audience, as well as how their research can contribute to their field of study.

Others work in various government sectors, including one author who is now an analyst for the US government. Some completed law school and work for the US justice system or in international markets. Overall, the *PSAJ* authors continue to be successful, with many crediting their success to their undergraduate publication.

ASSIGNING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

So far, we have discussed the influence of the *PSAJ* on its authors and student editors; however, another critical question is how the *PSAJ* benefits faculty and students who read it. We surveyed PSA Faculty Chapter Advisors⁷ regarding their use of published undergraduate research in their classroom due to the proliferation of undergraduate research and publications.⁸ Only 30% of those surveyed responded that they found using published undergraduate research moderately to extremely important as required readings and discussion topics or that they assigned examples in their courses. Of the 191 respondents, only 20% (N=34) reported using published undergraduate research in their courses. Those who did so reported assigning undergraduate work mainly in the senior seminar/capstone courses and research methods courses rather than in introductory courses.

Nonetheless, Faculty Chapter Advisors are open to using undergraduate research to enhance students' understanding and skills. We asked them questions adapted from the *Survey of Undergraduate Research Experiences* (Lopatto 2008). In response to our survey, more than half agreed that using undergraduate research in their classroom was important for a student's understanding (1) of the research process (71%); (2) that assertions require supportive evidence (67%); (3) of how scientists work on real problems (53%); and (4) of primary research and literature (50%). Less than half of faculty respondents agreed that using undergraduate research in their courses was important for a student's (1) ability to integrate theory and practice (40%); (2) ability to analyze data (38%); (3) skill in science writing (37%); (4) skill in the interpretation of results (35%); and (5) clarification of a career path (30%). Overall, these attitudes suggest that faculty place more importance on using published undergraduate research as examples of how research problems are examined rather than as a tool to teach analytical skills to their undergraduates.

CONCLUSION AND CALLS TO ACTION

Twenty years later, it is clear that serving on the *PSAJ* Editorial Board has had many positive effects on student members. Former Editorial Board members indicated that peer reviewing was a learning tool that pushed them beyond assigned classroom readings. Reading papers submitted to the journal exposed students to different topics, helped them to work better with others, understand the importance of asking for advice from colleagues and superiors, and how to conduct and write about research at a scientific level. As one of the first Editorial Board teams speculated (Bauer et al. 2009), former members use these skills throughout their professional and academic careers.

We encourage undergraduate students to conduct research and submit their work to the *PSAJ*. Faculty mentors must encourage undergraduates to undertake a research project. Undergraduate students often are hesitant when they begin writing papers; they have no experience formulating research questions, writing the literature review, or applying the appropriate methodology.

Many Faculty Chapter Advisors acknowledged that the *PSAJ* offers the best example of superior undergraduate research and writing. However, few of them reported using a *PSAJ* paper in their courses.

We call our colleagues to include published undergraduate work in their courses. If students are exposed to undergraduate research articles, they can read a writing example from their peers and understand how to write for both a college and a professional audience, as well as how their research can contribute to their field of study. We hope that publishing 12 exemplary articles from the journal will draw attention to excellent research that can be integrated easily into the classroom. If students are exposed to undergraduate research articles, in addition to the content they learn, they can read an example of their peers' work and learn how they can contribute to their field of study. By reading their peers' work, students might realize that they are not only consumers of political science research but also that they can produce their own research.

The growth of undergraduate research journals has created a space for undergraduates to be recognized for their work and have their voice heard by other undergraduates and scholars. As a reminder, the *PSAJ* rotates host schools every three years, with Elon University's term ending in 2023. We encourage faculty to submit proposals to host the *PSAJ* in the future. The *PSAJ* presents unique opportunities for your students to be involved in our field.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication materials are available on Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FVKAGM>. ■

NOTES

1. Gender was determined using the authors' first and last name, their region of the world, and their email using a gender application programming interface (see <https://gender-api.com>). The accuracy is calculated as 94.8%.
2. For more details on the peer-review process, see Bauer et al. 2009, 566–67.
3. For more details on the peer-review process, see Bauer et al. 2009, 566–67.
4. This March 2020 survey underwent Institutional Review Board review and was deemed "exempt research." (Project number: 1567681-1.)
5. The March 2020 survey underwent Institutional Review Board review and was deemed "exempt research." (Project number: 1551821-1.)
6. The Centennial Issue is available at https://issuu.com/psajournalou/docs/pi-sigma_alpha_journal_centennial_issue_2020/2.
7. PSA Faculty Chapter Advisors are political science faculty in departments in which chapters are located. Faculty Chapter Advisors guide the chapters and confirm that

membership requirements are met. For more information, see the PSA national website at www.psigmaalphabet.org.

8. This survey was administered in May 2020 to 800 PSA Faculty Chapter Advisors; 200 responded (i.e., 25% response rate) and 191 completed the survey. This survey underwent Institutional Review Board approval and was deemed "exempt research." (Project number: 1577860-1.)

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We've Moved!

The Association section of *PS: Political Science & Politics* has moved to a new member magazine, *Political Science Today*, which will launch in February 2021. *Political Science Today* will publish news about the discipline, in memoriams, Council minutes, and other material historically published in *PS*.

Make sure to update your journal delivery preferences at www.apsanet.org/user-home to receive the first copy of the member magazine. If you have questions about the magazine, please contact publications@apsanet.org.

