

Increasing Enrollment in Political Science Majors: Opportunities & Challenges

Notes from Department Chairs Luncheon APSA 2023¹

Susan Scarrow and Bennett Grubbs

Theme: How to Attract and Retain Students

Panelists (in alphabetical order): Amy Cabrera-Rasmussen (California State University, Long Beach); Michelle Deardorff (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga); John Ishiyama (University of North Texas); Ashley Leeds (Rice University). Moderator, Susan Scarrow (University of Houston).

Panelists and audience discussed ways to attract and retain two kinds of enrollment pools: majors, and non-major students who take one or more political science classes either because they must (to fulfill General Education requirements) or because political science courses appeal to them as electives. Complete roundtable abstract is available in the APSA Annual Meeting program [here](#).

Specific ideas fell into four overall groups:

- 1) Curriculum adjustments
- 2) Community-building
- 3) Promoting the product – helping students and their parents understand what they gain from political science classes or from being a political science major.
- 4) Strategic course delivery to boost enrollments (majors and otherwise)

Curriculum adjustments

- Adding minors, including working with other programs to create interdisciplinary minors with political science component.
- Adjusting concentrations within the major or adding alternative majors to move away from traditional fields that make sense in political science, to fields that make more sense in real world, such as non-profit leadership; campaign & election management; data sciences; REP.
- Adding capstone courses to help keep students connected and challenged.

Community Building

Many students are looking for more than just a major; they are attracted to departments where the major offers community and an identity. Doing that means promoting your specific department, not just the discipline of political science.

- Building strong cohorts through first year/first semester courses for majors, whether this is a substantive course such as a special section of a required American Govt course, or is a 1 credit hour 'introduction to the political science' department.

¹ The 2023 Department Chairs Luncheon was originally scheduled to be in the JW Marriott Hotel and feature a "Learning From Each Other" dialogue event where 11 former APSA Presidents or Elect Council members were going to lead discussions with Department Chairs around core subjects. This original event received over 40 registrations which placed us in line with recent historic attendance. However, due to a labor dispute the event was moved out of the JW Marriot one month out, requiring both a conceptual rethink and significantly disrupting Annual Meeting participation.

- Branding with swag: key chains, pens, etc. Handed out at recruiting fairs and at open houses for majors.
- Department chair (or other faculty) regularly check in with the student clubs that attract political science majors, whether or not those clubs are run through the department.
- Hold regular events for majors.
- Assign faculty mentors to students in addition to their academic advisors.

Promoting the Product

One overall suggestion was that departments may want to devote time to discussions of what/who their political science major and courses are for. Most of our majors are not going to graduate school to study political science. So what is the value of our curriculum? To make better citizens? To improve skills in writing and data analysis? The value of our degrees does not speak for itself – it is up to us to figure out what we want to emphasize, and then to message this to our current and future students (and their parents). Some suggested ways to do this:

- Alumni/student lunches to highlight what recent graduates are doing with their degrees, taking care that participants include alumni who are not just in the obvious fields of law and political staffing.
- Building selected offerings that appeal to specific career trajectories, such as offering strong pre-law advising, or sponsoring courses connected with Moot Court.
- Offering certificates that attest to certain skills that students may acquire. The examples given were certificates in diplomacy.
- Use surveys of recent alumni (or do your own survey using Linked In) to more systematically document what students are doing with your degree. Categorize the types of employment, display this in a pie chart on your web site and as a prop whenever you are meeting with current and prospective majors (and their parents): this is concrete and reassuring evidence that political science majors do get worthwhile jobs.

Strategic Course Delivery to boost enrollments (majors and otherwise)

- Offer topical courses, such as an “elections” course in the fall of even numbered years, or courses having to do with current events (Ukraine War).
- Be strategic about offering and adding courses that count for any distributional or general education requirements.
- If you teach large required American Government (or other) courses, create a separate section for majors, taught by a top professor, and focus on retaining the majors who sought you out to begin with. Retention is a fundamental part of the recipe for building a strong major.
- But also, use these required courses as recruiting opportunities: make sure that professors in these courses are promoting the major and letting students know what courses they might want to take next semester if they want to take the next steps in the major.
- Club-related courses like those related to Model UN or Model Arab League or Moot Court can attract healthy enrollments. Many of those students won’t (yet) be political science majors. This is an opportunity to boost general enrollment, and perhaps to win over a few new majors.

- One department offers a course in “Speaking Across the Political Divide”, which is designed to teach students about speaking/listening to those who may not share their opinions.
- Attracting students is not just about promoting the “usable skills”: another approach is to emphasize the normative dimensions. Courses that deal with tough issues from a normative perspective (justice, representation, democracy) can be good gateway courses to hook students.
- Work with other departments to build inter-disciplinary majors or minors with a political science component. That could mean working with departments that have large student bodies (e.g., a political risk management minor for business students, or a political psychology minor for psychology students). It’s better to work together than to see your students be scooped up by others, whether a humanities-based pre-law program, or a “data sciences for society” program in a different college.

Links to related APSA resources with ideas for recruiting and retaining students:

Curriculum Adjustments

- Honeyman, Victoria. 2023. “Restructuring the Curriculum – Pedagogy and Practical Implications.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-7kr37](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-7kr37). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.
- Plencner, Joshua, and Allison Rank. 2023. “Political History and/as the Future for Undergraduate American Politics Curriculum.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-1ghq4](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-1ghq4). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.
- “[How to Successfully Lead a Department Pedagogical Reform in Political Science](#),” APSA webinar. February 2, 2023.

Community Building

- Gentry, Bobbi, and Christopher N. Lawrence. 2023. “Grand Theft Student: Strategies and Tactics for Political Science Recruitment and Retention.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-646tx](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-646tx). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.
- Gentry, Bobbi. 2023. “Advising and Identity Development: Insights for Political Science.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-22bn0](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-22bn0). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.
- Riley, Chris. 2023. “Career and Calling Circles: Spaces of Belonging for First-Year Underrepresented Students.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-pzh7d](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-pzh7d). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.

Strategic Course Delivery

- Alcocer, Marco et al. 2023. “Supplemental Online Resources Improve Political Methods Education.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-5l9fg](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-5l9fg). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.
- Cragwall, Jesse. 2023. “Using OERs to Close Inequity Gaps in Political Science.” APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-dr7xx-v2](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-dr7xx-v2). APSA Teaching & Learning Conference, February 10-12, 2023.

- Thunberg, Michael, and Steven Sodergren. 2023. "Crossing the Line: Building Value with 1-Credit Experiential Courses." APSA Preprints. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-1024q](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-1024q). *APSA Teaching & Learning Conference*, February 10-12, 2023.
- Phillips, John. 2023. "Raising the Stakes on a Political Science Major Field Test: Evidence from a New Capstone Course." *APSA Preprints*. doi: [10.33774/apsa-2023-lkdb4](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-lkdb4). *APSA Teaching & Learning Conference*, February 10-12, 2023.

Additional Tools Mentioned During the Event:

- Ishiyama, J. (2023). Whither Political Science in a Post-Pandemic World? Challenges, Trends, and Opportunities. *Perspectives on Politics*, 21(2), 419-424. doi:[10.1017/S1537592723000099](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723000099)
- Ishiyama, J., Breuning, M., Thies, C., Van Vechten, R., & Wallace, S. (2021). Rethinking the Undergraduate Political Science Major: An Introduction to the Symposium. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(2), 353-357. doi:[10.1017/S1049096520001900](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001900)
- [APSAs Updated Guidelines for the External Review of Political Science Departments](#)
 - [Orientation Guidelines for External Reviewers of Political Science Departments](#)
 - [Supplemental 1: Possible Questions to Answer in a Departmental Self-Study](#)
- Everly, M.C., Bonifas, R., Weber, P. and Mallory, C. (2021), Strategic Enrollment Management: Success Tips for Chairs. *The Department Chair*, 31: 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dch.30359>.