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## A Century of Continuity and (Little) Change in the Undergraduate Political Science Curriculum

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**A**lthough in recent years there has emerged a renewed interest in teaching and learning issues in the APSA, relatively little attention has been paid to the structure of the undergraduate political science curriculum. In this article we conduct a broad survey of articles that appeared in the APSR from 1906 to 1990 and find that (1) in the past the association paid much attention to the undergraduate political science curriculum; (2) over time attention shifted from a conception of the major as promoting substantive knowledge to a conception that emphasized skills; and (3) current concerns regarding skills, sequencing, and capstone experiences were all discussed several decades before the appearance of the "Wahlke Report" in 1991. We offer an explanation for the ebb and flow of the attention curricular issues received historically in the APSA, and suggest what the future may hold for current efforts to reexamine the structure of the undergraduate political science curriculum.

**T**here has been a long tradition of efforts to "reform" the undergraduate political science curriculum in American colleges and universities. Most of these efforts have failed and been long forgotten. Why did they fail, and what lessons can we learn from their failure? Although curricular issues have been hotly and recurrently debated in many political science departments, at the level of the profession as a whole attention has been paid to these issues only intermittently. Within that broad context, the focus of reform efforts has shifted over time from the political science major as a promoter of substantive knowledge to an emphasis on skills, such as critical thinking, which are associated with a liberal education. Over time, too, concern has often been expressed about the proliferation of courses without a clear need or plan, and calls have repeatedly been issued for a structured ordering of classes, culminating in a capstone course. Meanwhile, as debate has continued over the role of civic education in the curriculum, recommendations by various organs of the American Political Science Association (APSA) regarding curriculum change have largely been ignored.

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### RECENT DISCUSSIONS REGARDING THE UNDERGRADUATE POLITICAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM

As a point of reference, let us consider the most recent "officially" promulgated set of proposals regarding the undergraduate political science curriculum, those issued in 1991 by the APSA in a report entitled "The Political Science Major in the Liberal Arts Curriculum," popularly known as the "Wahlke Report" (Wahlke 1991). This was the first such report since the APSA's 1962 examination of the structure of undergraduate education, "Political Science as a Discipline." The 1991 project was initiated by the Association of American Colleges (AAC) (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities), which commissioned task forces in 12 different fields of study (Bennett 1991, 48). These reports generally took "unstructured" curricula to task, castigating them for their inability to develop the building blocks of knowledge that are conducive to sophisticated understanding and critical thinking (AAC 1991, 24). Reflecting that outlook, the political science report advocated greater curricular structure and coherence, asserting that a program of study that emphasized breadth at the expense of depth would result in "shallow learning unless students also grasp the assumptions, arguments, approaches, and controversies that have shaped particular claims and findings" (Wahlke 1991, 49). Though critical of the structure of the undergraduate political science curriculum in many colleges and universities, the Wahlke Report stopped short of specifying a model curriculum, citing differences in institutional size and in departmental and institutional missions as the reasons for not doing so (Bennett 1991, 48).

Three of the Wahlke Report's recommendations, each structural, stood out.<sup>1</sup> The curriculum should, the

<sup>1</sup> The Report emphasized many things such as the inclusion of race, class, and gender in the political science curriculum; teaching in comparative perspective the introductory American politics course; and raising international awareness. Although all of these are

report recommended, follow an integrated and sequential course of study rather than skip around through a disconnected jumble of individual courses. The curriculum should also be broad in scope, capable of familiarizing students with the wide array of analytical approaches, assumptions, and methods in use in the discipline. Finally, the curriculum should culminate in a senior seminar or equivalent “capstone experience” (Wahlke 1991, 52).

More specifically, the preferred course sequence would begin with a common freshman experience that introduced incoming majors to theories, concepts, and issues central to the discipline. This introductory course would thus both convey an accessible overview of the discipline and serve as a building block for subsequent courses. After the introductory course should come a required course on research methodology, emphasizing exposure to the broad contours and logic of social scientific inquiry rather than statistics per se. That emphasis followed from an understanding of the political science major as one component of a broader liberal arts education rather than as prevocational training; that is, the purpose of studying political science as undergraduates was not to produce political science graduate students, but to enable students to “comprehend and deal with the political world after graduation” (Wahlke 1991, 50). Finally, a capstone course, such as a senior seminar or other form of senior experience—not merely a senior thesis—was recommended to provide a broad synthesis of what students had learned over the course of the major.

Solid evidence about the impact of such curriculum changes in political science remains in short supply, for even though most academically based political scientists spend most of their time teaching and doing research, rarely do these two activities intersect in research about teaching. Still, in recent years, evidence has begun to accumulate that a structured and sequenced political science curriculum along the lines envisioned in the Wahlke Report can have real payoffs. Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama (2001), for instance, report greater student learning under a structured and sequenced curriculum, and Ishiyama and Hartlaub (2003) observed a link between curricular structure and the development of students’ abstract and critical reasoning skills. Another study, this one of curricular structure and student performance in 32 colleges and universities, uncovered a strong relationship between student knowledge and curricular structure, even controlling for other potential influences on student performance (Ishiyama 2005a).

Thus, although the evidence that is currently available is not abundant, it suggests that curricular reforms like those advocated in the Wahlke Report “work.” Even so, it is a simple fact of life that no matter how well these reforms may work once they are adopted, only rarely are they adopted. Tellingly, a survey of 193 political science programs in ten Midwestern states

showed that only 18% of them possessed the three major structural elements—a common introductory course, required coursework in research methods, and a senior capstone course—that were recommended in the Wahlke Report (Ishiyama 2005b).

### LOOKING BACKWARD: HISTORICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE POLITICAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM

That so few undergraduate political science curricula are in conformance with the recommendations of the Wahlke Report should occasion little surprise given the discipline’s track record over the past century. Historically, as indicated by the documentary record of APSA presidential addresses, APSA council and committee minutes and reports, and APSA-sponsored journal articles, there has been very little concern about teaching in political science. For instance, from 1906 through 1968, when teaching- and learning-oriented articles were rerouted from the *American Political Science Review* to the APSA’s new journal, *PS*, only 47 articles on such topics appeared in the *Review*—an average of just .71 per year.<sup>2</sup> Nor were these articles spaced out evenly over time. Rather, there were two observable attention “spikes,” one during the 1920s and the other in the late 1940s. Of the 34 articles that dealt with undergraduate education, 21 focused on curricular issues. After the 1940s, teaching and learning issues in general and the undergraduate curriculum in particular were for all practical purposes missing in action from the *Review*, and were more or less relegated to second-class status with the appearance of *PS* in the late 1960s.

What might explain the surges in considerations of teaching and learning issues during the late 1920s and the immediate post-World War II period? In part, these surges were reflective of the times, particularly the optimism that then prevailed about what could be accomplished in education following the two wars. For instance, the 1920s witnessed the rise of functionalism and “scientific management” principles in public administration and other social science disciplines. This included the idea that “good outcomes” (such as well-educated college graduates) could be planned and intentional, and that such outcomes could be measured. The same faith held during the 1940s, when optimism pervaded the discipline in the early days of the behavioral revolution, reflective of confidence in the ability of the scholarly community to put scientific principles of education into practice. This postwar spike was also a result of the expansion of the number of students in higher education, particularly after the adoption of the G.I. Bill. Many students who had not previously had access to higher education were now flocking to colleges and universities, and many of these students were interested in the acquisition of practical skills.

laudable and relevant goals in a political science curriculum, in this article we chose to focus only on the main recommendations of the report regarding the *structure* of the political science curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> The 47 articles were the total number of articles dealing directly with teaching and learning issues that appeared in the *APSR* from 1906 to 1990. Although many of these articles also discussed civic education, they focused largely on the structure of the curriculum and were coded as such.

These factors converged to heighten the demand for educational innovation, thereby calling into question the viability of the traditional undergraduate political science curriculum. Thus, it is little wonder that post-World War II political scientists took a renewed interest in issues related to teaching and the structure and content of the undergraduate political science major.

What did the authors of these articles say about the political science curriculum? Did different approaches to the curriculum emerge over time? The authors of early *Review* articles tended to emphasize the goal of getting students to know the substance of the material—and particularly facts related to political systems and processes. For instance, the Committee of Seven, after conducting a survey of 458 colleges and universities across the country, put forth a set of observations and recommendations regarding the “improvement of the teaching of political science” at the college and university level (Haines 1915, 355). Its report was critical of the haphazard way in which programs were laid out, noting the “sometimes unwarranted tendency to add . . . courses in a department” (Haines 1915, 357). It called for a “standardization of courses” and proposed a categorization scheme that departments could employ (Haines 1915, 365). Its recommendations emphasized more detailed coverage of American government (suggesting that an entire year of study be devoted to this pursuit) and greater geographical breadth in course offerings (requiring European politics and offering courses on Latin America and “important countries” in Asia). The report even included specific questions to be followed in structuring various courses. At the heart of all this was the notion that the primary learning objective of the political science major was the student’s acquisition of substantive knowledge and practical training, albeit in a more systematic way than had previously been possible.

Most other reports and studies during the 1920s and 1930s emphasized painstaking description and acquisition of substantive knowledge as the cornerstone of the undergraduate political science curriculum (Hall 1922; Reed 1930; Stahl 1937). There were, however, exceptions. Bates (1927), for example, discussed the merits of instruction on the basis of function rather than on description of governmental institutions, and Corwin (1929, 569) argued for the inclusion of explanation rather than for mere description in the political science curriculum. One of the earliest arguments against the primacy of substance was made by Russell M. Story of Pomona College. Ostensibly writing about the introductory political science course, Story argued that the current emphasis on description and “practical” training was misguided: “Is there a fundamental and dynamic approach to political science which offers emancipation from the worst evils we now endure and from the mental malpractice in which we now participate?,” he asked. He answered that an emphasis on descriptive material and practical methods would produce “a class of student Babbitts, skilled crammers, immediate forgetters, creatures of rote, and unwitting pillars of some form of oligarchy” (1926, 422–23).

Story advocated a curriculum based on sequencing of knowledge, with students first being exposed to the process of scientific explanation. The aim of such exposure would be “to challenge the validity of the thought process and opinions of the student with respect to all social phenomena and to indicate how much of the political credo of the average man has not rational quality so far as his relation to it is concerned” (1926, 425). In short, what was needed was a curriculum that produced “critical thinkers,” which was “candid, objective, scientific and explanatory,” and hence would contribute to the “age-long dream of a great society of free men (and women) in a free state” (Story 1926, 428). Thus, the development of critical thinking faculties was the best form of civic education.

World War II was a watershed in the history of political science, not only because it fundamentally altered how political scientists viewed their role, forcing them to vacate their “academic ivory towers” (Dahl 1961), but also because it caused a fundamental rethinking of the political science curriculum. Although there had been a smattering of calls to rethink the major and to emphasize the cultivation of skills (like critical thinking) rather than substance before the War, the 1940s witnessed a deluge of committee reports and roundtables that called for just that: an undergraduate curriculum whose purpose was to cultivate critical thinking skills (see Laves 1940; Wilcox 1941<sup>3</sup>; Committee of the American Political Science Association on War-time Changes in the Political Science Curriculum 1942).

An early contribution of this type was authored by Walter Laves, who argued that “the time has come for an appraisal of the entire undergraduate political science curriculum” (1940, 983). Laves decried the unconnected and irrelevant courses that had “been growing like Topsy” (1940, 983). What was required, he held, was a more sequenced and structured curriculum. Although he offered no specifics about how that might be achieved, he did recognize that a major restructuring of incentives was required so that political scientists would pay more attention to issues related to teaching. Anticipating many later arguments for the primacy of pedagogy, he asserted that for real reform to occur, “those who are responsible for it must secure recognition in prestige and in salaries. Faculty members who spend time and energy upon their primary function of teaching are entitled to the identical recognition awarded to research experts” (Laves 1940, 986).

The 1942 report by the APSA’s Committee on War-time Changes in the Political Science Curriculum argued that the undergraduate curriculum needed to be reformed in order to rise to the challenges of the war. In these “times of crisis,” the report held, it was necessary to produce men and women of “keen insight and critical judgment” (1942, 1142). Although the committee’s

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly Francis Wilcox was also an earlier advocate of assessment. He wrote that “we might strive to perfect the following procedure: (1) determine the knowledge, skills, interests, and attitudes of our students at the outset; (2) decide what changes we hope to bring about by the course; and (3) measure, at the end of the year, the degree of success we have been able to achieve” (Wilcox 1941, 332).

recommendations were rather innocuous, two stood out: first, rather than “rush[ing] to introduce new courses,” existing courses should be updated to “make the full use of important new material.” Second, the primary learning goals for political science programs should include “the development of critical insight, keen judgment, and real understanding” (1942, 1142).

During the wartime years, several panels on the political science curriculum were convened at the APSA annual meetings, and some of the papers presented on these panels found their way into the *Review* (Mansfield 1947; Wilcox 1947). The authors of most of these articles argued that the political science curriculum should be supportive of civic education,<sup>4</sup> voiced strong criticism of the scattershot undergraduate political science curricula that were so prevalent, and called for reorienting curricular goals toward skills such as critical thinking and analysis, and away from straightforward factual material. In one such piece, Landon Rockwell directly linked the structure of the political science major with civic education, noting that the responsibility of most political science departments “is not primarily to train political scientists, but to educate responsible citizens in understanding the problems of government in contemporary society.” That mission, he contended, requires “the maximum of balanced integration if it is to fulfill its proper mission within the context of liberal education” (1947, 314–15). By this Rockwell meant integrating courses across the elements of the “political process,” including political ideas and theories, political institutions (their organization, functions, and operations), political dynamics (parties, pressure groups; propaganda, public opinion, and economic, social and geographic forces), political techniques and administration, and jurisprudence. He argued against viewing these diverse areas as independent courses of study, as they were being treated in many programs. Instead, students should be required to take courses in every field, and the wide exposure that they gained thereby would help them achieve an integrated and comprehensive understanding “of the political process, leaving no important gaps and offering opportunity for maximum correlation among the fields of political science” (1947, 316–20).

Another major report was issued in 1951, this one by the APSA’s Committee for the Advancement of Teaching. The report, *Goals for Political Science*, which was based on a survey of 251 institutions, offered several recommendations, including a caution against the proliferation of courses (Fesler et al. 1951, 1000). Reflecting the mood of the time, it called for a more integrated curriculum that would help foster the “characteristics of the good democratic citizen” (Rossiter 1948). Although citing the diversity of departments, institutions, and missions as a reason for not offering specific recommendations about curricular structure (a rationale later repeated in the Wahlke Report), the report em-

phasized the connection between skill-oriented liberal education and citizenship training.

The 1951 report sparked several responses (Fesler et al. 1951; Dimmock et al. 1952). Critics like James Fesler and Louis Hartz granted the merits of an integrated curriculum with fewer courses and an emphasis on skills like critical thinking, but they did not view such a “liberal education” as a means for promoting civic education (Fesler et al., 998). Hartz in particular condemned the report’s approach to citizenship education as “indoctrination” and argued that “The first thing we must do . . . is to give up the proposition that the function of political science education, even on the undergraduate plane, is the creation of good citizens. . . . The job of the political science teacher is not to produce a good citizen but to produce an intelligent man [sic]” (Fesler et al., 1001).

Ultimately, the 1951 report had little impact (see Leonard 1999), in part because its recommendations were vague and its insistence on indoctrination was troublesome for many. A decade later, in 1962, yet another attempt to rethink the structure of the undergraduate curriculum appeared—the last APSA report on curricular issues that would be produced until the Wahlke Report in 1991. The 1962 report, “Political Science as a Discipline,” was produced by the APSA’s Committee on Standards of Instruction. Like the 1951 report, it shied away from providing specific guidelines for the political science curriculum, noting that “it seems unlikely that political scientists would necessarily agree that there is one best possible kind of undergraduate curriculum for the study of political science” (1962, 419). Nonetheless, it recommended the establishment of a general introductory course featuring an admixture of political theory, comparative government, and American political institutions. This would be followed by at least four distributional sets of courses in American political institutions, comparative government, international relations, and political theory. Finally, although a variety of electives and specialized courses should be available, an overproliferation of undergraduate offerings should be avoided. Not included in these recommendations was any emphasis on sequencing or any consideration of learning outcomes or of critical thinking (each of which had been stressed in earlier reports and discussions). Nor was the importance of methodology or a senior capstone or other culminating experience part of this report.

Despite the flurry of discussions regarding the political science curriculum in the immediate post-World War II period, very little resulted from these efforts. Although Francis Wilcox, the chair of the APSA’s Committee on the Advancement of Teaching, anticipated, perhaps naively, that the APSA would play a major role in encouraging “a joint consideration and definition of major objectives” (1947, 500), inaction prevailed. Perhaps this was due to what Robert Walker noted about the institutional impediments to changing the political science curriculum. Although Walker considered curricular reforms “imperative,” he recognized how difficult they would be to adopt and implement. Because they asked “unsettling questions,” the “wartime rash of

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Clinton Rossiter in 1948 went so far as to say that “since we are willy-nilly in a position to teach more than facts, we not only *can* teach good citizenship, but we *should* teach it” (Rossiter, 542).

curriculum-revision committees” was “upsetting, and it is a task for which few faculty members are prepared.” Faculty were pushed out of their comfort zones and hence were likely to resist changes (1948, 76).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, over the first half of the twentieth century there was a fairly rich discipline-wide discussion of curricular issues, particularly from 1915 to 1950 (although material regarding the undergraduate political science curriculum virtually disappeared from the *APSR* [and later *PS*] after 1962). This is not to say that political scientists conceived of the goals or structure of the curriculum consistently over time. Indeed, although civic education has been a concern of the profession since the inception of the APSA, the way in which the undergraduate political science curriculum has been conceived of (both in terms of goals and structure) has evolved considerably.

In the APSA’s early days, the learning goals for the major included gaining exposure to the substance and process of government and politics, to learning factual information about institutions, and to being trained for “practical” professions. Consistent with those goals, undergraduate political science curricula were designed to cover basic factual material, especially about the workings of the American political system and with a smattering of the politics of other countries, usually European. There was little in the way of a common core course, nor training in methodology, nor any consideration of a capstone experience. Although some (e.g., Story 1926) argued for a major that would produce critically thinking students and some degree of structure and sequence in the undergraduate curriculum, these voices were few and far between.

With World War II, a shift occurred along with a major reconsideration of the structure of the political science major. During this time many scholars argued against what they saw as a haphazardly structured major and the ongoing proliferation of unconnected, esoteric courses—criticisms remarkably similar to those that would be central in major reports a quarter- and a half-century later. These concerns gave rise to a series of APSA reports that sought to provide guidance for restructuring the political science major. However, these efforts had little impact on the discipline, and this process ended with the tame report that the Committee on Standards of Instruction submitted in 1962.

Overall, there has been far more continuity than change in the history of the undergraduate political science curriculum. Many of the principles spelled out in the 1991 Wahlke Report were by no means novel, for they had surfaced repeatedly since the 1920s. Recommendations for a focus on critical thinking skills as opposed to rote memorization, for a coherently structured and sequenced set of courses, for an emphasis on methodology, for a capstone course or culminating experience, and for the evaluation and assessment of learning had all been aired publicly in various reports and articles over the course of earlier decades. Nor,

despite all the talk, did the Wahlke Report, like its precursors, spur much action. Just as few political science departments had paid much attention to the recommendations of earlier discipline-wide curriculum committees and task forces, few now adopted the Wahlke Report’s basic curricular recommendations (Ishiyama 2005b).

Why have the recommendations of the myriad of committees and reports of the past had so little impact that the very same criticisms of the curriculum that were made in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s are still being made today? One potential answer is that the structure of incentives in the discipline militates against pursuit of educational issues in the APSA. In fact, this argument was made many years ago by scholars such as Story (1926), Laves (1940), and Walker (1948). Stephen Leonard argues that one of the reasons that civic education efforts have not had a lasting impact in the discipline is the structure of incentives facing faculty: “if you want to get ahead in academic political science, you don’t spend your time engaging in ‘civic education.’ You spend it on research” (1999, 749; more generally, see Abbott 1981). Indicatively, many faculty members speak of research “opportunities” and teaching “loads.” Indeed, research and publication are so highly valued and well rewarded that any disciplinary rededication to “education will have to await a monumental reconstruction of American academic culture” (Leonard 1999, 752).

A second reason relates to the disciplinary culture. As Leonard points out, many reports on teaching and educational issues have been ignored largely because their recommendations have been so innocuous (1999, 753). Further, Leonard suspects that another reason why the past reform recommendations have had so little impact is that, historically, the elites of the discipline have never really been behind the education effort in general and the civic education effort in particular. As Leonard (1999, 50) notes, no less a personage than the APSA President William Bennett Munro, who had also chaired the 1920 committee on civic education in the high schools, in his 1927 presidential address urged political scientists to abandon civic education efforts. Munro claimed that “the gigantic campaigns of civic education being carried out by organizations of every kind” with the intention of inspiring a “sense of civic duty” in citizens were “pure futility and waste” (1928, 7). Although Bennett (1999) and Schachter (1998) see more room for optimism for future efforts to improve undergraduate education in political science, there is no denying that the structural and attitudinal impediments that existed within the discipline in the past remain today.

Yet the existence of such structural and attitudinal impediments alone cannot explain the lack of change. We believe that there are at least two other reasons, both related to how the suggested revisions were implemented (or not implemented). First, previous efforts tended to be top-down, with little evidence of any effort to mobilize constituencies in support of proposed change. Historically, the committees that have formulated recommendations for the undergraduate

curriculum were dominated by scholars from large, research-extensive institutions, where the incentive structure is most heavily weighted toward research rather than teaching. This is not to say that scholars from research institutions could not also do quality work on teaching, as indicated by the cases of prestigious scholars like Charles Merriam and M. Kent Jennings, who actively promoted consideration of educational issues within APSA (Bennett 1999). However, the types of academicians most directly involved in the undergraduate curriculum and affected by recommendations for its reform have historically had the least input in the process. Although many APSA committees included members from primarily undergraduate institutions, rarely, if ever, were such committees chaired by faculty from such institutions, except for a select few elite liberal arts colleges. This meant that the tentative moves of the past never tapped into the constituencies that might have benefited most from increased attention to teaching and curricular issues.

A second reason was that no institutional frameworks existed around which the suggested changes could be propagated. There were no real forums (such as conferences on teaching and learning) where political scientists interested in continuing discussions on teaching issues in general and curriculum change in particular could meet. Once a committee of disciplinary notables had published its recommendations for revising the undergraduate political science curriculum, no follow-up mechanisms were in place to *sustain* efforts to implement the suggested changes. Without provisions for such follow-up, it is little wonder that past efforts simply fizzled.

In the first years of the twenty-first century we are witnessing yet another surge of interest in teaching and learning issues in APSA. If this surge is to not go the way of past failed efforts, then it is imperative to learn from the repeated failures of the reform efforts of the past century. In an era of declining enrollments and heightened competition for students, it is incumbent upon political scientists as educators to provide a rationale for students to take the courses we offer, to explain how the political science curriculum can help equip them for the challenges of their careers and/or postbaccalaureate education, and to clarify why we organize the curriculum the way we do. No less importantly, it is vital that we maximize the inclusion of interested constituencies in these discussions and provide the institutional forums to sustain such efforts.

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