APSA Presidential Task Force Statement on Teaching during the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic

Executive Summary:

The health and safety of faculty, instructors, staff, and students must be foremost in the mind of university leaders as they prepare for the resumption of teaching and instruction. APSA believes that everyone should have the choice to make the best decision for themselves regarding their health. Individual choice protects the basic civil and human rights of faculty, instructors, staff, and students in choosing if they want to work remotely, in-person, or some combination of the both, during the pandemic. The following statement provides detailed recommendations for institutions of higher education to consider for the restarting of instruction, including the importance of allowing choices for instructors and students and the necessity of providing appropriate supports for both online and in-person teaching.

The ongoing novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic that causes the disease COVID-19 has created new challenges for colleges and universities related to the practice of teaching and learning. This is true for all institutions of learning, including large research institutions, small liberal arts colleges and universities, community colleges, and predominantly Black (HBCUs), Native American (NASNTIs), Hispanic (HSIs), and other minority serving universities and colleges. Moreover, COVID-19 hit under-resourced institutions of all kinds particularly hard when faculty, instructors, staff, and students were forced to leave campus during the spring semester. As universities and colleges prepare for the start of Fall classes, which for many begins in mid- to late-August, the American Political Science Association (APSA) is concerned about the safety and wellbeing of faculty, instructors, staff, and students as they prepare to return to the classroom. Given the inherent risks that exist around COVID-19 when groups of people are brought together, which is the fundamental mission of universities and colleges of all sizes, APSA wants to reiterate that the health and safety of faculty, instructors, staff, and students must be foremost in the mind of university leaders as they prepare for the resumption of teaching and instruction.

The decision to return to in-person face-to-face teaching in the Fall poses significant, and potentially life-threatening health risks for many vulnerable groups in our academic, on-campus, and surrounding local communities and has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ community, economically fragile families, and others. The COVID-19
health risks associated with returning to campus also hold true for diverse communities who may not be considered “vulnerable”. Rather, anyone who returns to campus puts their families, the community, and themselves at risk, regardless if they have an underlying condition or not. Therefore, APSA believes that everyone should have the choice to make the best decision for themselves regarding their health. Individual choice protects the basic civil and human rights of faculty, instructors, staff, and students in choosing if they want to work remotely, in-person, or some combination of the both, during the pandemic (refer to APSA’s institutional statement for more details).

Due to the temporary suspension of in-person and face-to-face instruction, which is driven entirely by the pandemic, we encourage Departments of Political Science and Government to consider the following, as campuses plan to re-open.

1. COVID-19 has changed how universities and colleges of all sizes deliver their mission and various curriculum, and APSA recognizes that face-to-face activities are required in some disciplines, such as STEM and dance. However, in our discipline of political science, the preferred default should be online teaching during the pandemic. If teaching and learning is to take place in-person, faculty and instructors must be supported with appropriate health and wellness protocols and the necessary cleaning supplies so that everyone involved will remain safe from COVID-19.

This would require an element of choice as some instructors may choose to teach in-person while others may choose to teach online or use a hybrid format; the focus should be on how best to provide the safest teaching and learning environment for everyone involved. This position reinforces the concept that there should be no requirement for anyone to participate in face-to-face instruction and related activities during the COVID-19 pandemic if instruction cannot be provided in a safe and secure environment.

2. Regardless if someone has an underlying condition(s), or not, all faculty, instructors, and students should be given the option to teach or take a course online, and that individuals be given the right to make the best choice for themselves and their families. Providing faculty, instructors, and students with this choice is imperative to the well-being of individuals. Anyone’s individual choice should not and cannot be used to “punish” faculty, instructors, or students in the future.

In practice, this means that faculty and instructors must be provided options in how to deliver their courses – 100% online, hybrid, face-to-face – and be allowed to choose what works best for them, without reprisal or penalty from the University, College, or Department when it comes to performance reviews (annual, pre-tenure, tenure or promotion), pay raises, graduate stipends, travel funding, scheduling options or any other means. This also means that students can choose to take all of their courses online, or not, and their choice should not negatively impact their grades, recommendation letters, applications to graduate/law schools, award considerations, fellowships, or similar.
3. Universities must take seriously the privacy and civil rights of faculty, instructors, and students, which means giving everyone the right to NOT be on campus if they choose.

Faculty, instructors, staff, and students should not be compelled or required to provide medical or other personal health information about themselves or their families to their employers, colleges, or universities in order to qualify for exemptions from in-person or on-campus work, teaching, study, or related activities. Any effort to compel individuals of the campus community to release private medical or health information to justify their exemption from in-person campus activities during the pandemic does not simply entail an invasion of privacy; rather, such a policy places non-medical administrators and chairs in the position of determining the “appropriate” health risks of each person, a position most administrators and chairs are not qualified to fill. Moreover, compelling faculty, instructors, staff, and students to share their medical and/or health information would place far too many in positions where future retaliation and/or discrimination would be possible for any forced disclosures.

4. Faculty, instructors, and students must have “good” internet access that supports the online platforms used by each university or college. “Good” internet access is a prerequisite to successfully working remotely.

This may require universities and colleges to find funds to support faculty, instructors, staff, and students who are facing financial pressures related to COVID-19 and who may not have the financial means to access “good” internet services. This is particularly true for universities and colleges that serve a high number of low-income and PELL Grant eligible students. Universities cannot assume that their faculty, instructors, staff, and students have equal access to resources. We strongly encourage universities to take the steps required to increase this access.

5. Universities and colleges, and in particular Departments of Political Science, must create flexible policies and accommodations for faculty, instructors, and students, including those who may become ill during the semester or join the class mid-semester due to a diagnosis of COVID-19. Teaching and learning are varied based on the student population, pedagogy, and individual instructor; as a result of these diverse learning communities, faculty and instructors should think about how to respond to the changed environment caused by the pandemic.

The changed environment will require faculty and instructors to build flexibility into their syllabi while maintaining appropriate curricular content and rigor. This may include modified assessment measures, such as the use of pass/fail grades, “free passes” or the ability to drop one assignment, asynchronous instruction, options or “choice” for graded assignments, flexible due dates, recording lectures to be posted online, and reducing or eliminating the number of group projects or collaboration with classmates due to students living in different time zones, differing access to the internet, and different home lives. Additionally, instructors should also consider the following: the language they insert into their syllabi, such as “COVID-19 policies,” regardless of how they deliver their courses (online, hybrid, or in-person); how
they plan to hold office hours or study sessions; how will comprehensive exams for graduate students or exit/comprehensive exams for undergraduates be implemented (e.g., online or take home are options). This will require Departments to re-consider any strident rules, and coordinate with related schools, such as the Graduate School, particularly if face-to-face instruction, exams, or other related assessments cannot take place. Punitive measures will disproportionately affect students who are struggling with the on-going pandemic.

6. Departments need to think about course evaluations, how will they be implemented, and how they will be used to assess faculty teaching and pedagogy.

See APSA’s statement on personnel for more information.

7. It is imperative that faculty and instructors recognize that students may not be taking courses in an environment that is stable and conducive to a productive learning environment – students’ home life maybe uncertain, their technology shared with others in the household, students may be taking on child care and caregiving responsibilities for other members of their household, and their mental health/well-being may not be reflective of what they are truly capable of doing in the classroom under “normal” circumstances.

As stated above in point 5, faculty and instructors are encouraged to create flexibility into their syllabi while maintaining rigor and course content so that students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their ability to perform. For example, this could entail creating weekly or bi-weekly online quizzes on the reading instead of having the traditional mid-term and final exams. While it is up to individuals to decide how to shift their course assessments of performance, we emphasize the need for empathy and understanding of the tremendous pressure students will be under in the upcoming term.

8. Statewide university systems and large research institutions are in the process of creating one policy for campus re-openings, but there should be some individual autonomy at the level of campus/college/department to set their own policies based on the most recent science and input from faculty, particularly as it results to the wellbeing and safety of faculty, instructors, staff, and students.

Individual departments are closer to their faculty, instructors, staff, and students. They understand their classroom spaces and technological capabilities best. Classroom and instruction delivery should be made in concert with the needs of individuals and the campus community. This will include class enrollment sizes to allow for social distancing when face-to-face instruction takes place, and clear university protocols about cleaning and wearing masks. The decision-making process should take a “bottom up” rather than a “top down” approach, due to the importance of shared responsibility in delivering the curriculum and individual courses. When faculty, instructors, and students, both graduate and undergraduate, work in concert, the important educational and research missions of the university will be continued, despite the challenges COVID-19 presents.
9. Many universities and colleges are offering online courses and professional development to support faculty and instructors who have not taught online or have only done so since Spring 2020. Such training opportunities are often broad and cross-disciplinary but are an important component of delivering a comprehensive curriculum. These training sessions should be made available on a continuous basis to faculty and instructors. Further, the American College Health Association (ACHA), in its guidance to universities and colleges, recommends class sizes of fewer than 30 students implement a hybrid mode of instruction (i.e., a combination of in-class and online instruction) for the foreseeable future and that classes with more than 30 students are taught exclusively online. ACHA’s guidance also recommends remote online options be available for vulnerable students and those in quarantine.

APSA’s website provides various training resources, “best practices,” and other forums to help facilitate faculty and instructors’ transition to online and hybrid teaching. APSA also acts as a hub for information sharing specific to online teaching in the sub-fields of the discipline. APSA encourages teaching centers on every campus to share this information with their faculty.

10. Teaching online is different, but not inferior to teaching in the classroom. There are many benefits of learning and teaching online. For instance, teaching online:

   a. Allows for faculty and instructors to build a trusting relationship, which is an important component of great teachers. Excellent teachers depend on a positive ethos of trust in the learning environment that goes beyond the physical space of the classroom or the physical presence of the faculty. Online modes of teaching will allow for a relationship of trust to prevail between instructors and students in classes during the pandemic.
   b. Provides flexibility in the delivery of curriculum for faculty and instructors (e.g., instructors can incorporate synchronous and asynchronous elements into their syllabus);
   c. Allows students to acquire information according to their individual learning style;
   d. Creates opportunities for different types of interactions, including direct interactions, between faculty, instructors, and students;
   e. Reinforces teaching essentials, objectives, assessments, materials, and activities that focus on student learning;
   f. Allows faculty and instructors, who are no longer confined to the classroom and the technology (or lack of such) in assigned classrooms, to introduce video conferencing, storyboards, blogs, social media, and other technological tools into their courses;
   g. Opens up new possibilities for assessment, as faculty and instructors can assess factual learning in an automated way via their schools’ platform and focus on higher order learning during online interactions; and
   h. Online instruction provides a variety of teaching tools and “best practices” that can be integrated into the design of online courses.
11. APSA encourages universities and colleges, if they have not done so yet, to create an online system to share confidential disability accommodation letters for students. This is imperative for students who are eligible for a range of accommodations.

This will require the appropriate offices on campus to coordinate with faculty to ensure that they receive accommodation letters prior to the start of the semester so that accommodations and appropriate adaptations, where necessary, can be made. This is especially important for students who need a quiet room to take tests and exams; they may need a longer time frame to take tests due to the challenges of living at home, sharing computers, inadequate internet connection, or a range of other possible challenges students with a diagnosed learning disability may encounter.

In conclusion, we advise that online teaching should be the default mode of teaching political science for universities, colleges, departments, and other academic units during the ongoing pandemic. This temporary suspension of in-person and face-to-face teaching and learning de-densifies campuses would help prevent the rise of the rate of infection, and the consequent neighborhood transmission of the virus both on campus and within the surrounding local communities. This will require flexibility from instructors and must be financially supported by universities, colleges, and departments in order to allow for equal access across all students. Finally, and most importantly, if in-person teaching must resume, it can only be done with the explicit consent of the instructors and students who are putting themselves at risk. Should instructors or students opt-out of such a method of learning, universities and colleges must respect that choice while not requiring additional medical information. We believe that this procedure is the only way for teaching and learning to safely resume, and APSA is willing to be a resource for departments attempting to follow our established guidelines.