

Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Interests

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The purpose of this statement is to communicate my pedagogical perspective and my teaching interests. First, I describe the basic tenets of my teaching philosophy. Second, I discuss the kinds of courses I would be most qualified and excited to teach. Third, I describe how to interpret the student evaluations which follow.

Teaching Philosophy

As a teacher, my primary goal—simple enough to articulate, more challenging to achieve—is to teach my students to think. I push students to think more analytically, more creatively, and more often. No matter what the curriculum, I emphasize the development and practice of critical thinking skills above all else. I challenge students to exercise their brains and, by doing so, to learn *how* to learn. I urge students to engage the world; to identify important questions, approach these questions scientifically and conscientiously, and unravel the answers (or at least more good questions). If my students leave my classroom more astute, more inquisitive, and more empowered than when they entered, I have done the first half of my job.

As a teacher of political science, my second (equally important) goal is to teach my students how to apply their critical thinking skills to the particular and fascinating phenomena of politics. This, too, is no easy task, and one rendered even more challenging by today's turbulent political environment. Students across political stripes often approach politics as either a distant, faceless system with no direct bearing on their lives or as a frustrating exercise in non-responsive bureaucracy. It is for this reason that critical thinking skills play such a pivotal role in my teaching. I find that, in most cases, lecturing provides insufficient motivation for political learning or pathos. But endowed with skills of logic and discourse, students can demystify politics and develop their own political voices (whatever they may be). If my students leave my classroom with a greater sense of political agency and a robust understanding of the political system—not just the facts but the “why’s”, “how’s” and “so what’s”—I have fulfilled my job.

Toward these aims, I employ four fundamental pedagogical tenets: 1) a safe and productive learning environment, 2) a multi-dimensional approach to information, 3) a focus on student engagement, and 4) an emphasis on the *science* of political science.

A “safe learning environment” is as essential as it is cliché. I work to create a thriving and accepting environment through the mindful use of sincerity, enthusiasm and humor. I have discovered that these three elements are rewardingly contagious, even among the most cynical or seemingly-apathetic of students. Most importantly, I maintain an acute awareness of my class. I know when students are engaged, when they are confused, when they need a sympathetic ear, and when they need a proverbial kick in the pants. In this way, I tailor the content and structure of each class and assignment to maximize student growth and achievement—not on average, but for every student. I believe this student-based focus makes it possible for each student to take an equally vital role in the class, regardless of background, ability, or political views.

I take a multi-dimensional approach to information because different students learn differently and because all students learn better when energized. A key ingredient is regular and lively

discussion, in which I employ Socratic dialogue methods to coax richer comprehension of concepts and to build students' reasoning skills. I utilize group thought puzzles and in-class experiments designed to put students in the shoes of judges, presidents, speech writers, lobbyists, citizens in other nations... anything to get students to internalize the "why," "how," and "so what" of political mechanisms. When I lecture, in addition to expecting students to participate by means of questions and discussion, I keep things lively by utilizing multiple media formats. For example, I make a practice of incorporating political cartoons, campaign ads and debates, Supreme Court interviews, and even talk show parodies to encourage students to connect with the material on a personal (and thus a higher cognitive) level. Most importantly, I go out of my way to illustrate the multidimensional nature of each concept, to relate concepts to the "real world," and to synthesize the information I communicate. For instance, throughout each course I reiterate the importance of formal and informal institutional constraints and the interaction between political institutions and human behavior. Woven through discussions, assignments, thought exercises, and projects, these concepts come to resonate with students, structuring to their understanding of the political system as a multi-dimensional and dynamic set of interconnected processes. Sometimes the best way to communicate core concepts is through solid information—of the "how a bill becomes a law" ilk, but with more punch. At other times, less conventional means are helpful. To illustrate informal institutional constraints, for instance, I might show a video clip of the seemingly perilous traffic patterns in India, in which cars and pedestrians (not to mention pigs) appear to zoom haphazardly in every direction. To most American students' astonishment, the cars narrowly avoid hitting one another (or the people or the pigs) through a system of unwritten but inviolable social traffic norms that students can visibly identify. Through exposure to concepts on multiple levels and in multiple media, students comprehend subject matter more quickly and more completely.

No matter what the classroom activity or out-of-class assignment, I urge students to engage the material by holding them accountable for their learning. I foster engagement and accountability in several ways. I begin by advocating "active" reading and listening, teaching students how to develop a running internal dialogue with the text or the speaker in order to connect more directly with the concepts and to formulate relevant questions in response. I also require students to learn concepts comprehensively enough to teach to one another and to teach back to me. I respond to most questions with more questions, leading students to discover answers for themselves and, thus, to gain a greater sense of self-reliance. And I have high demands for students' writing. In order to think critically, I believe, one must be able to write coherently. I work to improve students' writing through in-class and out-of-class exercises, as well as one-on-one tutoring.

Finally, throughout my teaching, I stress the *science* of political science. I believe that all students seeking to learn the substantive elements of politics should also receive training in the scientific study of politics. Thus, for the duration of my time with them, I treat students as political scientists, and I expect them to perform as such. Whether students will go on to study politics, to study something else, or to work in an applied field, these skills will translate across disciplines and duties. I make a point of integrating lessons on scientific thinking and research design into my curriculum. I also use individually-tailored final research assignments as a way to foster students' critical thinking skills in the context of a political question about which they have personal investment. The most surprising—and most empowering—lesson for new students in our discipline, I think, is the realization that the questions they care about most can almost always be articulated as questions of political science.

I did not develop these educational methods quickly, or in a vacuum. I have refined my teaching through a variety of instructional experiences. In college, I taught evenings at the Santa Fe Indian School in Santa Fe, NM. Between college and graduate school, I spent three years teaching mathematics at a college preparatory school for Native American students in Rowe, NM. At Penn State, I taught an undergraduate course in American politics. And at Stanford University, I gained graduate-level teaching experience when I served as a TA for the Summer Institute in Political Psychology. My pedagogical approach is also strongly influenced by my own educational experiences, which have been rich and varied. In fact, I could state my teaching philosophy simply in these terms: I aim to engage my students in the critical thinking and discourse skills that distinguished my undergraduate experience while advocating the discipline and ingenuity of the first-class social science research that has exemplified my graduate training.

As an undergraduate I attended St. John's College, a private liberal arts school with 400 students on each of its twin campuses in Annapolis, MD and Santa Fe, NM. St. John's is characterized by its all-required Great Books curriculum. All courses are taught through the Socratic method, and the only textbooks are those original works most formative to western civilization; from Euclid to Einstein, Thucydides to Twain, Homer to Hegel, Mozart to Millikan. While many of these texts have no immediate bearing on political science as we understand it today, the skills of critical thinking, listening, writing, and discourse permeate across research agendas. As a political scientist, these tools are my most valuable assets. It is this set of skills that I endeavor to impart to my students, who arrive in my class already capable of learning the basic facts of government from a textbook but for whom the abilities to reason, contemplate, and compose will open the most doors. Whenever possible, therefore, I base my classes around the discussion of core concepts rather than ready-to-be-regurgitated facts. From leading small seminar discussions to commanding a large audience in a lecture hall forum, I structure my teaching around comprehension, not memorization.

As a soon-to-be Ph.D., I come from Penn State University—a vibrant research community one hundred times as large as my undergraduate alma mater. Only through working with Penn State undergraduate students have I come to realize just how lucky I was to attend a school small enough to foster the critical thinking skills of each and every student. At the same time, I now understand just how much I missed by not attending college at a school large enough and with enough resources to provide top-notch research training to every interested student. I have come to believe that research is an essential component of a student's development, no matter what that student's future holds. Good scientific investigation is merely an extension of good critical reasoning skills. I want my students to experience the best of both educational paradigms—liberal arts and research. Thus, I emphasize the abstract principles of critical thinking, reading, writing, and discourse in addition to the applied components of systematic political inquiry and analysis. These are skills, I hope, which will last students for the rest of their lives.

Teaching Interests

Based on the nature of my training, I am well-suited to teach a range of courses across four broad categories of applied political science and research methodology. First, my dual training in both political institutions and political behavior enable me to teach several types of **American politics** courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Within institutions, I can teach courses on public policy, Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, institutional dynamics, and agenda-setting and issue-framing. Within behavior, I can teach courses on macro public opinion, voting

behavior, and political psychology. I also look forward to teaching courses that emphasize the under-explored but important relationships between institutions and behavior. For example, I envision a course on information processing broadly defined, in which students would investigate the similarities and differences between human processing and institution processing and the implications for how institutions affect citizens and vice versa.

Second, I am able to teach courses in **media** and **political communications** at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. My core offerings in communications could include media and politics, media dynamics, candidate image and campaign advertising, and Presidential rhetoric. While I would tailor each of these classes to the particular needs set by credit requirements or course cross-listing expectations, I would consistently provide an American politics lens through which to examine communications scholarship conducted in these important political settings and the implications of this work for our larger understanding of the American political system.

Third, I am qualified to teach a variety of **methods** courses. I would welcome the chance to teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in research design, emphasizing not only the how-to's of quantitative and qualitative methods but most importantly the concepts and practices of social inquiry, scientific procedure, and hypothesis testing. At the undergraduate level, I can teach probability, regression, game theory, and experiment design and implementation. At the graduate level, I can teach probability and regression (including the first two courses in a standard graduate methods sequence), as well as content analysis, time series, experiment design and implementation, factor analysis, Kalman filtering, and using the WCalc algorithm for aggregate public opinion analysis.

Fourth, I am able to teach courses on **professionalization** and **good practices of political science**. At Penn State I benefited greatly from courses of this kind designed to acclimate students to the rigors of graduate life and to the larger political science discipline. I would enjoy designing graduate or undergraduate professionalization courses focused on such level-appropriate topics as: writing as a social scientist, establishing an efficient data management system, developing a Senior Essay / MA Essay / dissertation topic, crafting a compelling conference presentation, applying for internships / grants, and applying for grad school / academic jobs. I would like to pass the guidance I have received from my mentors on to younger colleagues. I have strong ideas about how to present this material in an effective manner, and I believe students would derive significant value from such courses.

How to Interpret the Enclosed Student Evaluations

Following are student evaluations for the American politics course, "Democratic Discourse," which I taught at Penn State as an integrated curriculum with English Composition. The Student Rating of Teaching Effectiveness presents a summary of student ratings in response to 13 questions about the course and my instruction. For each question, students selected a number between 1 and 7, with 1 representing least effectiveness and 7 representing most effectiveness. For reference, at Penn State the average score received for A1 "quality of course" is 5.5. The average score for A2 "quality of instructor" is 5.7. This summary was compiled by an independent source at PSU.



Vice Provost for Academic Affairs

with technical support from the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence

Student Rating of Teacher Effectiveness

This report contains confidential data and is not for public use

Instructor **Course & Section** **Special Semester/Year** **Location**
 BOYDSTUN, AMBER ELLE PL SC 001 202 A SU06 UP

Enrollment	Number of Forms	Percentage of enrollment	NOTE: Enrollment numbers are acquired before the end of the semester and may differ from final figure.
0023	23	100%	

A1	Number/Percentage of sheets marked as elective:	4	17.4%
A2	Number/Percentage expecting grade of:	A: 13/56.5%	B: 8/34.8% C or Lower: 1/4.3%

Reported for each item are the number and percentage of respondents selecting each rating, and the total number(N) and mean for that item.										
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	MEAN
A1	Rate the overall quality of this course.	0	0	0	0	1	11	11	23	6.43
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	48%	48%		
A2	Rate the overall quality of the instructor.	0	0	0	0	1	4	18	23	6.74
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	17%	78%		
B1	Rate the instructor's skill in communicating at a level appropriate for the students.	0	0	0	0	1	11	11	23	6.43
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	48%	48%		
B2	Rate the instructor's interest in whether or not students understood course content.	0	0	0	0	1	4	18	23	6.74
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	17%	78%		
B3	Rate the adequacy of the instructor's knowledge of the subject matter.	0	0	0	1	0	7	15	23	6.57
		0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	30%	65%		

B4	Rate the instructor in terms of his/her preparation for class.	0	0	0	0	0	7	16	23	6.70
		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%		
B5	Rate the clarity of the syllabus in stating course objectives, course outline, and criteria for grades.	0	0	0	0	1	5	17	23	6.70
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	22%	74%		
B6	Rate the instructor's enthusiasm about the subject matter. Rate the effectiveness of the instructor in demonstrating the significance of the subject matter.	0	0	0	0	1	3	19	23	6.78
		0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	13%	83%		
B7	Rate the correspondence between exams and the important aspects of the course.	0	0	0	0	0	13	10	23	6.43
		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	57%	43%		
B8	Rate the fairness of the overall grading system in the course.	0	0	0	0	0	6	17	23	6.74
		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	26%	74%		
B9	Rate the instructor's skill in motivating students to do their best work.	0	0	0	0	0	7	16	23	6.70
		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%		
B10	Rate the instructor's openness to discussion of other viewpoints.	0	0	0	0	0	4	19	23	6.83
		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	17%	83%		
B11	Rate the effectiveness of the instructor's presentations. Rate the appropriateness of the instructor's teaching methods to allow students to achieve course objectives.	0	0	0	0	1	7	14	22	6.59
		0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	32%	64%		