Ten Years In: Reflections on Creating a Political Science Major from Scratch

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Introduction

In the Spring 2009, Wingate University – a small liberal arts college on the outskirts of Charlotte, North Carolina – created a new general education curriculum that would change the direction of the University. Emphasizing an international focus and themes of global awareness, the general education committee created a number of what became known as "GPS" courses, short for "global perspectives." These six GPS courses spanned the disciplines of history, literature, philosophy, religion and political science. While courses in history, literature, philosophy and religion have had a long presence on our campus, the political science course created by the curriculum change had no faculty support, and nothing amounting to a political science program, minor, or major of any kind. This generated the need for political science on our campus, and where the story of political science as Wingate begins.

Prior to 2009, Wingate offered a course in American Government, which primarily existed to support state requirements mandated by our Education department. The class was taught by a History faculty member. No other political science course had ever been offered, and certainly no political scientist had ever been involved in constructing curriculum, or making recommendations on what political science *looks like*.[1] This new Global Perspectives curriculum included the course entitled GPS 220: Global Perspectives in Economics and Political Science, and it created the need for a political scientist to not only teach the course, but also advise on what the course should include, what texts were appropriate, and how to effectively incorporate aspects of economics or political economy into the course. (The origin story specifically of GPS 220, with its dual focus on

[1] This is not to argue that a historian or a professor in another discipline can't teach a challenging and intellectually rigorous course on politics. I am just pointing out the reality of political science situation on our campus.

global politics and economics, is itself interesting, a function of desires from the Board of Trustees, and the influence of economists on the general education committee).

In Fall 2009, I received a phone call to interview for the position of Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wingate. The search committee included a philosophy professor, two economists, and a sociologist – again, no political scientists! Remarkably, I was hired for the position, and beginning in August 2010, took the reigns over the GPS 220 class, and was tasked with building a political science program. The catch, was that I was a newly minted Ph.D. with several years teaching experience as a lecturer, but had no administrative experience and no knowledge of the internal workings of a University. Like many liberal arts colleges, ours was teaching focused, and carried with it a 4-4 teaching load. Given that GPS 220 was the only political science course (with the lone exception of the sporadically offered American Government course) I only had to prep this one course. All the while, however, there was a University expectation for greater course offerings within the discipline of political science. Moreover, I was personally motivated to expand our course offerings, create a political science minor (and in time, a major), and hire more faculty.

This paper will summarize the lessons learned from 2009 on in creating our political science program at Wingate. This comes at a time when there were not many universities developing political science degree programs in the country, there was ever present doubts about the liberal arts tradition, and there was little formal guidance on how to start a major.[2] Even the American Political Science Association did not have much in the way of literature on this subject. Though the APSA

[2] There are universities outside of the United States, particularly in China, post-Soviet Europe, and the Middle East which have created new degree programs in political science over the last thirty years. Because of the distinct political and historical trajectories of U.S. political science, these lessons will be discussed only in relation to American political science programs.

had literature on how to reform a major, improve it, or recruit to it, there was not much in the way of starting the major from scratch. What were we to do?

Between the early 1900s and the 1970s, the discipline of political science would grow considerably in the United States. In his essay, "Political Science in the United States: Past and Present," David Easton described the growth of political science in four stages: a) formal; b) traditional; c) behavioral; and d) post-behavioral. In those early stages, history and political theory were prominent elements in the study of politics. Political science in the early 1900s involved a qualitatively-driven, often non-scientific approach, which emphasized "description and the collection of information," over "overarching theories" (2000: 292). But in the 1950s, with the rise of the Michigan School and the behaviorialist movement, that would change. Books such as the *The American Voter* would demonstrate the growing consensus that political science can and should be more scientific in the its orientation. This behavioral revolution, as it began to be called, would mark a turning point for the growth of political science, the increase in graduate programs, and the growing esteem of the political science major. By the time of the post-behavioral period – which would challenge much of the behavioral consensus – political science was a well-regarded, long-standing, and popular major across college campuses.

But Wingate University, which began first as a high school, then as a Junior College, and developed by the mid -1970s into a 4-year school, missed this disciplinary evolution altogether. While the University would grow from College status, to University status, by the mid-1990s, political science would not be a part of that growth for some time. By the early 2000s, the University shifted its concentration to a health science-focused school, creating a Pharmacy program, and then Physicians' Assistant school. As of 2019, Wingate has grown to include Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Nursing. Without the re-vamping of the general education core in 2009,

it is likely that political science would never have made it to campus. I say this not to be pessimistic or overly cynical, but to offer a reality: creating a political science program and emphasizing the wisdom of a social science degree in our current educational climate proves challenging. National growth in the political science degree is close to flat, though job opportunities and wage growth appear promising.[3] And though many liberal arts colleges and universities remain committed to social science degree programs, state legislatures are increasingly skeptical of their value and parents and students are increasingly worried about the cost of college education and such degrees which do not *appear* to promise job security.

Over the last ten years, a great deal has been learned about starting a political science major at Wingate in such uncertain times. These lessons include: 1) The importance of understanding administrative process; 2) The importance of understanding the academic catalog, as well as other disciplines; 3) The importance of understanding hiring; and 4) The importance of recruiting and enrollment. Many other lessons – both large and small – have been learned the last ten years. But these four categories of lessons best encapsulate the major issues of concern. Moreover, regardless of whether your University has had a long-standing degree-granting program, or none at all, there are perhaps lessons here that may be useful to utilize in your own department.

Lesson 1: Administrative Process

Developing new courses and a new academic program typically involves wading through, and making sense of, bureaucratic and administrative processes. This was certainly true of the creation of the political science degree. During the fall semester of 2010, I began to think about next steps in building a political science program and what that might look like. Because my main teaching obligation was to the core curriculum of GPS 220 courses, it limited the offerings of the

[3] https://datausa.io/profile/cip/political-science-government

"department" of one person at that time. Because the GPS 220 course was essentially an Introduction to Comparative Politics course repackaged as GPS 220, we had that course essentially on the books. We also had American Government in the course catalog, but it was offered sporadically. One of the first decisions I had to make was what additional course(s) to offer. My research fields were Comparative Politics with a secondary field in International Relations. My area studies focus was Eastern Europe. However, prior to Wingate, I spent four years in a lecturer position teaching mainly courses in Political Theory. Like many who teach at smaller, teaching-focused institutions, it is not uncommon to be a bit of a utility player, but I still had to decide which direction to go. With comparative and American somewhat covered, I surveyed several students who had shown an interest in political science on which class should be offered. I selected various topics in IR and theory which might have been of interest, knowing that a fully enrolled course could prove to the University the value of a political science major. The students suggested a course studying terrorism, what I called "Causes of Terrorism."

Navigating the minutiae of any bureaucracy is complex, and academic bureaucracy is no different. Getting a course approved at Wingate is a 3-4 month process, which starts with departmental approval[4], Arts and Sciences approval, approval by the Academic Affairs committee, and then approval by the Faculty Assembly.[5] At any stage in the process, the course can be kicked back to the previous committee, or department, for further review. This same process was needed to approve the minor and the major. The only difference with the major, is that adding a degree program requires Board of Trustees approval. As a first year Assistant Professor with no knowledge of higher education administration, these procedures seemed daunting. This was part of the job

[4] I was placed in the Department of History my first year at Wingate, which was later rebranded to become to the Department of History and Political Science.
[5] The Faculty Assembly was replaced by a Faculty Senate model in Fall 2018.

never studied in graduate school, and rarely considered in temporary lecturer positions. And though I study politics for a living, and call myself a political scientist, I was not quite prepared for the political nature of academic bureaucracy. (In retrospect, this sentence is incredibly naïve, but it was not on my radar as a first year faculty member).

One particular anecdote illustrates these politics. After the Causes of Terrorism course was approved as PSCI 390, a designation given which would be given to special topics courses, I wrote up a proposal for a PSCI minor. The reasoning was simple: In getting a minor, it institutionalized political science on our campus, and would help to grow student enrollment and ask for more faculty support. Moreover, getting minors approved was typically an easy process. Minors are not required of graduates, and do not require accreditation oversight or Board of Trustees input. Simple, until one accounts for certain political realities. A member of the academic affairs committee from another department, someone I did not know well, was hesitant about approving the political science minor. He was adamant that the University should be more cautious about adding courses or programs of study. His opposition -- as I learned later -- was not to political science per se, but to the University's historical inconsistencies with adding and *subtracting* academic programs. (The previous year his major lost a faculty position, and was downgraded from a school, back to a department). An older faculty member helped me to navigate this slight bump, but at the time, I was convinced political science was doomed, and my time on campus was short-lived. Causes of Terrorism and the political science minor were approved Spring 2011.

Another administrative hiccup arose when the political science major was up for approval in the Spring 2012. Like the course addition, and the minor, putting a major on the books required the major proposal to wind its way through the proper bureaucratic channels. The one major difference, as noted before, was the role of the Board of Trustees. Faculty members, department chairs and

even Deans are limited in their contact to the Board of Trustees. Their work is often done outside of the purview of the everyday faculty and staff. The Vice President of Academic Affairs (now the Provost) is the conduit between the faculty and the Board of Trustees, a makes the B.O.T. aware of any upcoming business, like the addition of a major. After flying through the department, the Dean's office, and the Academic Affairs committee, the addition of the political science major was put on the Faculty Assembly agenda. This all happened, however, without the Vice President of Academic Affairs being aware of its movement through the channels. The political science proposal was held up for two months while the VP navigated her own bureaucratic channels. Letters of apology were sent to her, and eventually, the issue worked itself out and the major was approved.

The lesson is to **understand the bureaucratic nature of academics and the administrative process** by which universities function. As I have learned it is generally there to protect you and not harm: to improve a weak proposal, to rally consensus around a complicated idea, and to get other colleagues on board to support your academic program.

Lesson 2: The Academic Catalog

Without hyperbole, the political science major at Wingate started on the back of a cocktail napkin. In the Summer of 2012, the Department of History and Political Science met in Asheville, North Carolina – three hours to the east of Wingate -- for a departmental retreat. While the historians in the department met amongst themselves, myself and political scientist Dr. Magdalena Krajewska, recently hired in Fall 2011, went to grab lunch. Dr. Krajewska was the second political scientist Wingate hired. She could teach the American Government course, and was also brought in to contribute considerably to our GPS curriculum. Over lunch that day we strategized about the future of political science and the major, sketching out a rough draft of what a major might look like on a cocktail napkin.

While we had other universities to compare to, and our own experience going through undergraduate political science programs, we were limited by our number of faculty, and our respective expertise. Dr. Krajewska, like myself, was a comparativist, though she did also have experience in American politics. Because International Relations was my secondary field, and I had four years of experience teaching political theory, we decided to develop a curriculum emphasizing four subfields: 1) American; 2) Comparative; 3) IR; and 4) Political Theory. We did not have the faculty expertise to teach courses in public law, administration, or research methods, other subfields you may find in political science programs.

A typical major at Wingate is 30-36 credit hours, or roughly 10 courses derived specifically from the chosen degree program. Another 50-60 hours would come from the general education program, and roughly 40 hours from other electives outside of political science from which students could choose. (For example, every political science student must choose one advanced elective in the discipline of Sociology). Part of creating our major was figuring out how to effectively provide the breadth and depth of courses a student would need, while understanding our limitations on time, resources, and expertise. What we did was reach for a course catalog, and try to make sense of how many pre-existing Wingate courses could either be rolled into the major, or required as an advanced elective. We identified courses in sociology and communication that would be valuable for our majors in the development of professional skills. We identified two courses in psychology that would work for our research methods courses. In the case of political theory, we identified two philosophy courses that would help in fulfilling the requirements of political theory (See Appendix 1). From there, we filled in the gaps with our own expertise, designing courses that we could teach, or in a few rare cases, find a suitable adjunct if need be. We also speculated that in building in a major and creating courses that were needed, but that *we could not effectively staff* – like several of our International Relations offerings – it would help us to make the case for more faculty in the future. (This worked out for us, but was

probably unwise. For a few years, it was very challenging to cover the breadth of courses we created, while also fulfilling our obligation to the GPS 220 curriculum).

Creating a major from scratch certainly has its drawbacks, but in this particular case, it helped two relatively inexperienced faculty have better knowledge of what colleagues in other disciplines were doing, and how our departments could work together. The fancy word for this is to think in an *interdisciplinary* fashion, but our decision was more rooted in necessity than lofty notions about being good colleagues. The end result, however, is that once you approach other disciplines with your students, other departments begin to reciprocate. This is especially valuable for those in the social sciences and the humanities who are increasingly worried about enrollment. Our lesson, to **investigate the course catalog**, can help programs with limited faculty numbers and few resources to build a functioning program that can be both academically rigorous but also diverse.

Lesson 3: The Hiring Process

One of the most challenging but rewarding opportunities any professor gets is to serve on a faculty hiring committee. Challenging, because identifying the best person for the job and then trying to hire that person is easier said than done. But it is rewarding to add a new scholar to the department, who bring with them novel skills and unique knowledge and expertise. Of all the responsibilities I have had in helping to develop a political science program, the most significant have been helping to hire Dr. Krajewska, and serving as chair of the search committee which brought our IR scholar, Dr. Jake Wobig, to campus in 2014. With the inclusion of Dr. Chelsea Kaufman, an Americanist who was hired in 2018, the Wingate political science department has

reached four full-time professors in political science: two in the subfield of the comparative politics, one faculty member in international relations, and one in American politics.[6]

Having participated in a search committee at two different R1 campuses prior to coming to Wingate, a faculty search at a smaller, more teaching-focused school is quite a different process. At R1 institutions, research and publication history and the promise of future scholarship drives the search, with less attention paid to teaching. At teaching colleges, many boxes must be checked off, including but not limited to: teaching, pedagogy, research, and the notorious idea of "fit." Whether looking for "fit" is a normal part of a job hire, or is a slippery slope which could promote discrimination, is the subject of much debate.[7] What is an essential consideration of any small, primarily tuition-driven institution, is recruiting and keeping students in your program. Departments in the humanities and social sciences that have seen their budgets slashed over the years, and are acutely aware of how brining in a new hire can revitalize a major, and bring new energy to the department. This might include being an exceptional advisor, helping to sponsor student organizations on campus, taking students to professional conferences, supervising internships, or collaborating with students on research.

An obvious but important lesson is to **hire the right people and take the hiring process very seriously**. As a growing department, we have been fortunate to hire every other year to support the program. This has enabled us to recognize areas where we were weak, and hire to offset those weaknesses. An example of this involves our award-winning Model United Nations program.

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[6] I am also personally delighted with the hire of Dr. Kaufman, though I was a smaller part of the hiring committee which brought her to campus.

[7] In its, "Best Practices for Conducting Faculty Searches," Harvard University's Office of the Vice Provost noted: "Be especially vigilant about statements concerning 'fit.' This euphemism is often used to exclude individuals whose demographic characteristics don't match the demographics of the department or field. If 'fit' were the best driver of decision making, the Harvard of today would be identical to the Harvard of the past" (10). https://faculty.harvard.edu/files/fdd/files/best_practices_for_conducting_faculty_searches_v1.2.pdf

Around five years ago, a student came to me wanting to start a Model UN program. I had no background in Model UN, and knew it was quite an undertaking. In the job interview, Dr. Wobig mentioned his interest in Model UN, and the rest is history. The club attracts students from across the campus, and has increased enrollment in his foreign policy and IR classes significantly. This is only one, of several examples, where hiring good people can radically alter a department for the better.

Lesson 4: Recruiting and Enrollment

Every so often a report from the Dean will appear in my inbox. In it, are the "numbers" – how many students are enrolled in our courses, and how many students have declared political science as a major. Like all healthy majors, recruitment and enrollment are significant pieces to having a strong degree program. As mentioned earlier, at smaller, tuition-driven universities, enrollment is a persistent question across the board. We do not have a large endowment, and roughly 98-percent of all revenue at our university comes from student tuition dollars. Retention – the number of students who enter school and persist through graduation – is a topic of constant conversation. As such, growing the major is important not only because we want students to have knowledge in politics, but for very practical reasons as well: we want to keep the doors open at the university.

Recruiting students to a major can take many forms. In some cases, students are attracted to the content of courses. In 2012, when our major was created, we started enrolling students during a Presidential election cycle, one that saw the incumbent Barack Obama accept the nomination at the DNC convention in Charlotte, just 30 miles north of campus. Students could see firsthand both a local and national connection to the courses being offered. On many occasions, we have surveyed students on what types of classes they would like to see. This approach is particularly successful at

attracting non-political science students into the major, to either take more classes in the department, or declare as minors or majors. Our two most popular upper division courses, "Causes of Terrorism," and "Music and Politics," were both created after consulting with students about their interests.

Course content is also attractive when it appears to offer something professionally. Students perceive political science is a good major for law school, or they hope it might help them to work on a campaign, or make connections in Washington, D.C. Because our degree program requires an internship, the major asks students to reflect on the relationship between their coursework and professional aspirations. Our students have worked for the State department, several U.S. Senate offices, numerous congressional campaigns, a multitude of law offices, and various city and county government organizations. It should be obvious that completing a major and finishing college would lead to gainful employment, but this element must be stressed often. Several of our best majors over the last eight years have faced questions from their parents and friends about the value of a political science degree. Continually emphasizing the connection between the coursework, practical experiences, and finding employment is a must to keep and attract students in the major.

Beyond what happens in the classroom, as a department we have engaged in a number of recruiting initiatives before a student gets to our classroom, or even arrives on campus. In short, we take every opportunity possible to make contact with prospective students. Every day, the Admissions office sends a list of prospective students to the campus with prospective majors attached. Any student with an interest in political science or pre-law gets a visit from one of the members of our department. These visits usually include a meeting with the student and their parents talking through the major, job possibilities, and expectations. Following these meetings, students get a welcome letter introducing the prospective student to our department and a bumper

sticker with our political science logo. Accepted students who deposit on their visit receive a t-shirt emblazoned with our departmental logo. We also take advantage of any special programs put on by the Admissions department, including Become a Bulldog Day, and Accepted Students Day. Getting visibility for the department is a central task, and perhaps the most important thing we do outside the classroom.

As a new program, our "growth" was easy to track. Going from no students, to over 50 students, showed substantial growth. But eight years in to the major, we are starting to plateau. To continue to gain resources for the department and our students, **we have to consistently keep in mind enrollment, recruiting, and growth**. Though this market-driven analysis might go against many of the reasons we entered academia and teaching, enrolling students and preparing them for the job market is a central mission of the profession, and we cannot shy away from it.

Conclusion

This essay was a reflection on the last ten years of political science at Wingate University. It started with one political science course, one faculty member, and no majors, and expanded to become a full-fledged major that has graduated over thirty students, including Fulbright award winners, campaign managers, future lawyers, and many other successful graduates. This growth occurred at a time when a liberal arts education and social science degrees have been viewed with skepticism. Thriving in such an environment has been a rewarding experience as a department. Hopefully these lessons will offer good reminders on how to grow our major, enroll students, and look toward a bright future for political science.