Curriculum Theory and Political Science Education:

A Contingency Approach to the Undergraduate Political Science Major

E. Fletcher McClellan

Elizabethtown College

mcclelef@etown.edu

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There is a variety of curricular models for organizing the undergraduate political science major (McClellan 2015). Among them are the traditional distribution model, which exposes students to various subfields in the discipline, and the sequenced learning framework recommended by the Wahlke Report (Wahlke 1991). Other structures include the student learning outcomes approach (Deardorff, Hamann, and Ishiyama 2009) and civic engagement education, the latter a recent area of emphasis in the discipline (Matto et al. 2017).

Embedded in these and other course arrangements are underlying theories of how students learn, what a curriculum is, its purpose, and its pedagogy. This study applies curriculum theory to current and potential models of the political science curriculum, describing the strengths and limitations of each structure as a platform for promoting intended learning. The findings suggest that the future political science major should not be a one-size-fits-all framework, but rather a choice from curricula that best address different learning goals and objectives, kinds of students, and program needs.

INTRODUCTION TO CURRICULUM THEORY

Formally defined, a curriculum refers to "all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school" (Smith 2000). Curriculum scholars identify several basic models of organizing a curriculum, though there are variations in practice (Bali 2018; Barnett and Coate 2005; Smith 2000).

Five models seem appropriate for analyzing curricula in political science:

1. *Curriculum-as-content* refers to the transmission of content or subject knowledge. This approach is associated with the idea that there is a canon of knowledge that all who engage in a discipline must learn.

2. *Curriculum-as-product* involves (a) determining the learning, in terms of knowledge, skills, and predispositions, which students need to succeed in the world, (b) selecting and organizing content and learning experiences to achieve specified outcomes, and (c) determining how to evaluate the extent of desired change in student behavior that has taken place. Influenced by scientific management thought of the early 20th century, this model assumes that education is largely a technical exercise.
3. *Curriculum-as-process* points to the interactions among teachers, students, and source material, i.e. what actually happens in the setting where learning is taking place. This approach, following the ideas of John Dewey (1916, 1997), views the classroom as a laboratory where ideas are tested and knowledge constructed by teachers and students.
4. *Curriculum-as-praxis* directs the process of teaching and learning toward shared understanding of problems affecting the human condition and plans for action. Critical pedagogy (Friere 1968, 2000) is deployed in this model, which places educational institutions at the forefront of social change.
5. The *hidden curriculum* refers to the values or messages conveyed to students by the larger context or institutional structure in which educational activities are occurring. These informal lessons might include respect for authority, sitting quietly and taking your turn, or, more critically, recognition of unequal status.

HOW CURRICULUM THEORY APPLIES TO MODELS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR

Curriculum-as-Content: The Distribution Model

Still the dominant approach to the political science major (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019), the *distribution model* comes closest to the *curriculum-as-content* theory. Typically,

departments require a series of courses that introduce students to key subfields of the discipline, including American government, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory. Survey courses introduce students to basic facts, concepts, theories, insights, great works, and influential thinkers in each subfield.

This is not to imply that political science faculty teach subfield survey courses strictly for the sake of transmitting information. Instructors may well have other goals in mind, such as developing critical analysis skills, and may use a variety of teaching techniques. In addition, distribution requirements can be scaffolded, as an introductory course can serve as a pre-requisite for upper-level courses in the same subfield.

Nevertheless, faculty should be aware of trade-offs when content knowledge is the priority. Skill development, integration of knowledge, and in-depth study may become secondary learning goals. A heavily prescribed curriculum may not provide students with opportunities to develop creative skills, discover new knowledge, or learn more about themselves. Similarly, civic and political engagement activities may be deemphasized.

Finally, the content model privileges those who choose the content. Students may be unaware of the reasons why content is included or excluded, and the hidden values that underlie those decisions. Perhaps most importantly, a content-rich curriculum may not give students much direction over the purpose of political learning, i.e. what they should do with this information once it is learned (Bali 2018).

Curriculum-as-Product: The Sequential Learning and Outcomes Models

Understood as a response to loosely organized distribution requirements found in many political science programs, the Wahlke Report emphasized curricular coherence and in-depth learning (Wahlke 1991). The undergraduate major should focus on the development of liberal

learning skills such as critical and analytical thinking, researching, writing, and oral expression, in order to produce politically literate college graduates, the report stated.

According to the Wahlke recommendations, the political science curriculum should be arranged sequentially and topically. Apart from requiring a common introductory course, a scope and methods class early in the program, and a senior capstone course or experience, departments should organize their curricula in a manner that incorporates comparative and diverse perspectives and leads to greater understanding, imagination, and synthesis (Wahlke 1991).

Under this formulation, content is a means to the end of skill development, not an end in itself. Thus, the sequential-learning framework suggested by the Wahlke Report fits the *curriculum-as-product* model. Measurement of the success of the learning program is based on student demonstrations of knowledge and skills. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between a sequential structure and student learning in political science (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003).

Adopted by a minority of political science programs (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019), the Wahlke framework was superseded by the *outcomes model*. This involves identifying what graduates should know and be able to do, articulating where in the educational program this learning should take place, measuring the extent to which students are achieving desired learning, and using the results of assessment to improve curriculum and instruction.

Though it took three decades to complete, most political science departments are complying with outcomes assessment guidelines (McClellan 2016). Compared to the Wahlke proposals, the outcomes model furnishes departments with greater flexibility as to the choice of student learning outcomes. Furthermore, the approach allows for various curricular arrangements, as well as forms of technology-aided learning, including MOOCs, mastery-learning modules, and “flipped” classrooms.

On the other hand, as with the content model, the choice of outcomes usually takes place independent of the involvement of learners. Strict adherence to teaching curriculum standards could disempower instructors as well. Valuable insights that arise from the interaction of faculty, students, and source material do not always correspond to the objectives of the lesson plan (Smith 2000).

Curriculum-as-Process: High-Impact Practices and Civic Engagement

The student engagement approach asserts that participatory teaching experiences or *"high-impact practices"* (HIPs) can promote "deeper" learning. HIPs include first-year seminars, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative classroom activities, study abroad, undergraduate research, community-based learning, internships, e-portfolios, and capstone courses (Kuh 2008).

Within political science, rising interest in *civic and political engagement* framed the discussion of HIPs (McCartney et al. 2013). Active learning exercises such as simulations and problem-based learning are employed, along with service-learning projects and internships, to promote civic education and involvement. Serving in a legal clinic to help asylum seekers (Dicklitch 2013) is an example of civic engagement, while political engagement efforts include get-out-the-vote activities, lobbying, and organizing petition drives.

The more that political science departments emphasize engaging teaching and learning experiences in and out of the classroom, the more the undergraduate curriculum reflects the *curriculum-as-process* approach. Faculty and students construct meaning by grappling with challenging questions and ill-structured problems.

The strength of this model is that it captures the messiness and unpredictability of the learning process. Active teaching and learning activities develop skills in critical thinking,

listening, creativity, and teamwork. Content and outcomes provide broad parameters for action as students learn by doing (Dewey 1961, 1997). Instructors or practitioners treat knowledge as tentative and open to scrutiny.

However, some scholars say the purported benefits of HIPs in and out of the classroom are exaggerated. Arum and Roksa (2011) remark that out-of-class activities, no matter how engaging, distract students from needed study time. Furthermore, they state that active and collaborative learning activities may make classes lively and interesting, but not necessarily demanding and challenging.

Certainly, there is less assurance in process models that desired content will be covered or outcomes achieved. There is likely to be considerable variation from class to class, depending on the skill of the professor and the particular configuration of learners. As for experiential learning, student engagement scholars Kuh and Kinzie (2018) admit that HIP experiences can be uneven.

Another kind of criticism focuses on the costs of implementing HIPs. Halonen and Dunn (2018) point out that some HIPs, such as collaborating with students on research, can be exhausting and time-consuming for faculty. Johnson and Stage (2018) question whether colleges should emphasize HIPs "at the expense of other possible offerings."

Curriculum-as-Praxis: Critical Analysis and Social Change

While curriculum-as-process models are more student-centered, as well as more liberating for instructors, the approach makes no explicit statement about the values and interests the educational process serves. *Curriculum-as-praxis* frameworks bring these issues to the forefront and raise awareness of the contexts in which student interactions take place (Smith 2000).

The goal of curriculum-as-praxis is informed and committed action to effect social change. Through dynamic exchange and reflection between teachers and learners, the curriculum evolves. Power differentials are observed at not only the macro-level, but in institutions of higher learning. For political science, then, classes and courses become laboratories for applied knowledge, understanding, and engagement.

Lately, the structural flaws of global capitalism, intensification of culture wars, and struggles of oppressed peoples have unleashed popular movements around the world (Hohmann 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Political scientists can use this opportunity to develop curricula that explore the causes and consequences of political alienation, leading ultimately to student activism.

The Hidden Curriculum: Democracy Begins at Home

Associated with curriculum-as-praxis, the *hidden curriculum* refers to what students learn from the way the school operates, rather than through the formal education program (Friere 1968, 2018). The regimentation of elementary and secondary schools is said to prepare young people for capitalist production. Rather than promote social mobility, neoliberal education is a process of social reproduction (Gottesman 2016).

Higher education faces a similar challenge. Prior academic preparation and family socio-economic status are strong predictors of college persistence and achievement, thus reinforcing inequality (Arum and Roksa 2011). First-generation and African-American students lag in access to HIPs (Kuh 2008). Research indicates that a hidden curriculum amplifies gender inequality in political participation, public policy, and involvement in the profession (Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012).

Political science could play a central role in deconstructing the hidden curriculum by using critical pedagogies (Brookfield 2005; Gottesman 2016), identifying centers of power and inequality in higher education, exposing students to strategies of political influence, and modeling democracy and inclusivity in departmental practices, faculty-student relations, and classroom conduct.

Praxis models conflict with the idea of value-free social science, which can make more than a few political scientists uncomfortable. However, departments and institutions with values-based missions may gravitate toward the approach. Given the increased diversity of the student population (Espinosa et al. 2019) and greater student interest in politics (Gardner 2019), more programs may respond similarly.

DISCUSSION

The purposes of this analysis were to describe some of the curricular models used in political science and, through the application of curriculum theory, unpack the assumptions each model holds of what students should learn and how. Understanding the different types of curricula and the aims to which they are directed should inform discussion of how to rethink undergraduate political science education. It should be clear that there is no one best way to organize the major. Rather, the choice of curriculum is contingent on what goals the political science major should pursue.

Political scientists have always disagreed about whether political science education should promote social science, citizenship, or specific careers in public service (Craig 2018; Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006). In the early days of the discipline, the focus was on careers in public administration and the law. As political science adopted the outlook and methods of modern social science, emphasis on career training diminished in favor of the pursuit

of value-free inquiry. Throughout, many members of the profession believed that active and informed citizenship should be the primary aim (Craig 2018).

The debate over the goals of political science education continues today. Increasingly diverse cohorts of students, many of whom are involved in political and social movements, seek greater curricular relevance. Millennial and Gen Z students look for degrees that provide career pathways. For the most part, political science faculty adhere to standards of social scientific research inculcated in graduate school (Craig 2018; Marineau 2019).

Looking at political science programs in recent years, much curricular change has taken place, but the content or distribution model remains dominant (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019; McClellan et al. 2019). Programs are addressing the liberal learning outcomes recommended by the Wahlke Report (McClellan et al. 2019), though only one-fifth of all departments require all elements of Wahlke's sequential course model (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019). Many programs have added capstones and internships, reflecting the influence of the student engagement or process approach (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013). However, few programs have increased emphasis on career development and ethics (Feeley and Van Vechten 2019) or diversity and social justice (McClellan et al. 2019).

Distilling this debate, Marineau (2019) describes three models that the undergraduate major should follow based on the kinds of skills students need to succeed. To be *researchers*, students need to know how to write high-quality research papers. Toward this end, the curriculum should prepare students for graduate education in political science or related fields, featuring quantitative and methods training and reporting on up-to-date findings in the field. The content model and liberal learning approach recommended by the Wahlke Report appear most suited for reaching this goal.

Second, civic education is most appropriate for students wishing to become *activists* (Marineau 2019). In this age of social protest, training for political activism should become increasingly popular. Movements within the discipline for civic and political engagement (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2016) and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Craig 2014) reflect greater interest among political science faculty in the process model. To the extent that activists are exploring alternative ideologies and models for social change, the praxis and hidden curriculum approaches are available.

The third goal of the political science major is *leadership*, according to Marineau. This is likely to be the first choice of most students, as few graduates in the discipline go on to graduate school in political science or become professional political operatives. Education for leadership might include learning outcomes in addition to transferable skills of liberal learning, such as career-preparation skills, professional ethics, and skills in conflict resolution (Marineau 2019). In addition, programs would include internships and other high-impact practices that are job-related.

Of course, the goals and curricula that individual departments choose will depend on institutional and department missions, the interests of political science faculty, and the composition and aspirations of students. For example, as stated above, programs that have explicit faith-based or social justice missions may develop a praxis curriculum. In many cases, departmental size may determine whether students are allowed to pursue or choose one, two, or all three of the goals of political science education that Marineau describes.

The issue that remains is whether political science programs should prioritize citizenship or certain kinds of civic education over other goals. In an era of "democratic setbacks and popular protest" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020), it could be argued that students should

understand the meaning and importance of democratic government. Under this view, political science has a special obligation to promote a more robust, rational, and morally informed democracy. This is reminiscent of previous debates in the discipline, often occurring in times of national or international crisis, over whether the aim of political science is to produce good citizens or good intellectuals (Craig 2018). Or, to put in another way, is there a larger cause that political science researchers, activists, and leaders should serve? If so, is not democracy the noblest cause of all?

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