Grand Theft Student: Strategies and Tactics for Political Science Recruitment and Retention

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ABSTRACT

As students have become more career-oriented, it has become increasingly challenging to recruit them into political science, since connections between the major and many potential job opportunities are not immediately apparent. Consequently, departments are seeing declining numbers in majors. To counter this trend, departments need to identify new strategies to recruit and retain students in our major. This work examines strategies and opportunities for recruitment of both prospective college students and current students from other majors. We also address potential retention strategies for current students, including introducing a cohort model, creating a departmental community, and making the work that we do more visible.

Introduction

  With increasing competition between institutions of higher education in the United States, along with increased reliance on tuition dollars at public institutions and a lack of sustainable endowments at private institutions, student enrollment has become the principal (if not sole) factor determining resource allocations such as faculty budget lines, programmatic funding, and other investments such as innovative pedagogy, professional development, and scholarships. In addition to this escalating competition between institutions, we are also dealing with increased competition *within* our institutions for student enrollment in our programs, as colleges and universities introduce more degree programs to attract potential students. As a discipline, political science needs to respond to these challenges through deliberate recruitment of students, with specific strategies and tactics that will build our programs and secure our place within our institutions, as well as potentially reinforcing our institutions' enrollment picture more broadly.

  The contribution of this work is to look at recruitment techniques from bird's-eye view, while much of the previous work in recruitment in political science has focused on a single strategy and the success of that strategy. Our discussion of multiple practices and models offers an opportunity for faculty to think about what is working and what can be improved in their programs and offers new programs and their faculty ideas for future development. Having multiple strategies in one place also allows for a more comprehensive conversation about what works in political science and what makes recruitment in political science unique.

Trends in Enrollment and Degree Completion

  The data on current enrollment trends in political science presents a mixed picture, with both encouraging signs and indications of emerging challenges. According to the 2017–18 APSA Departmental Survey, the most recent data available as of the time of writing, 48.8% of responding departments reported increasing enrollments while 25.0% of departments reported declining enrollments (APSA, 2019). Public institutions have seen more of an increase than private institutions, and enrollment growth has generally been stronger in departments granting graduate degrees than those that solely offer

undergraduate programming. According to the survey, both increases and declines in enrollment were primarily attributed to "Department and/or Institution-related factors" rather than factors more systematically connected to the political science discipline such as interest in the field or the impact of current events. These findings suggest that, while some aspects of recruitment are largely out of faculty members' hands, there is some scope for faculty to influence enrollments in the major.

The APSA survey data on student enrollments is generally consistent with findings from other sources. The 2020 *Digest of Education Statistics* from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that the number of bachelor's degrees in political science and government conferred by U.S. universities has been gradually increasing in recent years, with approximately 38,000 bachelor's degrees being awarded in the 2019–20 academic year (NCES 2021, Table 322.92). On the surface this would not be a troubling trend, but growth in political science (and other traditional liberal arts and sciences fields such as English, history, and psychology) has not kept pace with more obviously workforce-oriented fields of study such as business, computer science/information technology, engineering, and health sciences (NCES 2021, Table 322.10). This data suggests, in part, that making more explicit connections between our discipline and career opportunities associated with it—particularly opportunities that may not be apparent at first glance to students, parents, or other stakeholders—is a critical strategy.

With the changing nature of the higher education landscape, political science needs to consider how our student body is changing with more diverse backgrounds. Understanding the needs of our diverse student body include additional academic supports for first generation college students, mental health supports for students across the board, and acknowledging how our privilege can bias our understanding of student challenges.

Research on Recruitment and Retention

When we think about possible students within our major, we have two major recruitment pools: prospective students and current students. These audiences are different, but appeals can be similar. For

example, hosting events that are on campus and open to the public are a successful tool to engage multiple audiences. Similarly, a robust social media presence is important for connections with both prospective and current students.

Jonas Bunte found the importance of recruitment of students into our classes depends on the message. Students are more likely to enroll in a class when it appeals to them when it is framed in terms of an "opportunity to learn how the world works and how it relates to [our] students" (2019, 358). Messaging matters. Students want to connect with the course in terms of how they can apply the knowledge in the course to their personal and professional lives. However, students do not want an emphasis on skills learning in the classes (Bunte, 2019, 358). Skills can be what students learn along the way with the content, but in a world with wicked problems, they need to be able to apply those skills and knowledge in new and different contexts.

Thinking about how students perceive political science, Patrick Cotter argues how we frame political science to students can help with recruitment and motivation. Compared to history and psychology, politics is seen as more exciting, important, rational, and practical (1978, 59). However, these perceptions were in 1978, which may have changed in the current political environment. Some images of politics are less positive including more dirt and less purposeful than history (56). With the many different majors that students have available to choose between today, political science can emphasize the value of learning to different audiences of majors and minors. For instance, Cotter mentions the importance of knowing about politics as a key to success in business administration (61). Amplifying the excitement and engagement in politics can help with recruitment.

Recruitment of majors can also come from engaging classes. The "Crossfire Approach," in which two professors team teach an Introduction to American Government course incorporating debates over key issues, resulted in more students majoring in Political Science than any other Introductory American Government course (Baumgartner and Morris, 2015, 615). The debate between the professors and showing two sides to issues appealed to students and became an opportunity to discuss relevant issues

in political science. The partisan discourse engaged students and showed how two sides can agree to disagree on major topics (616). In addition to making classes engaging, making the questions and debates in the course central to class discussions can be a genuine way to show students the excitement and reality of politics.

Looking at prospective students, having a concrete set of career options that are clearly linked to the departmental curriculum is a benefit. Michael Rogers finds intentional curriculum choices that are career-oriented can increase recruitment. By clearly answering employability concerns of parents and prospective students, political scientists can be more effective at recruiting students who are interested in a job after college. In particular, Rogers shows that having specific tracks within the major that are more clearly tied to careers does lead to departmental growth in majors (2021, 390).

Multiple factors influence a student's choice of major. Montmarquette et al. suggest a student's perception of success in the program, perceived future earnings, and perceived earnings of graduates are key factors in major choice (2002). However, other factors also influence choice such as parental suggestions, student's perception of the difficulty of a major, and recommendation from a non-major advisor. For our programs, we can explain how students are successful and communicate average salaries for graduates with a political science degree.

Diversity in political science is still an area that needs improvement. According to Monforti and Michelson (2008), students graduating with a bachelor's in political science was still dominated by non-Latino whites (74.8%). For degree completion, Latino and Latina PhD students identify lack of support in terms of academic, financial, and family (2008, 164). Institutions and departments need a "long-term commitment to diversity" suggests Monforti and Michelson. The same can be said for recruitment and retention of undergraduates from diverse backgrounds.

Recent work in political science highlights specific departmental opportunities for recruitment. Having a presence across campus allows current and prospective students to see what the department is

doing and to be a part of activities. Presence is both a mindset and a set of actions that the department can take to be available to recruits (Gentry, 2022). Other methods also include bulletin boards in high traffic areas and a social media presence that actively engages students in politics and current events. Conversations with admissions officers to identify what prospective students are interested in, but is not currently offered at the institution, can show opportunities for growth or rebranding.

Misinformation about the major for prospective students, parents, and current students can also impact choice of major. Students often assume that political science is about law and elected office rather than the plethora of opportunities for careers in the discipline (Mazzei et al, 2022). One way to educate students about the discipline and its preparation for multiple careers is branding the department as "a place for people who care to matter" (2022, 547). Training advisors across campus about how political science can make the world a better place and how political science can help people close the information gap for students and parents. Providing accurate information was key to the recruitment of majors and when that gap was not remedied the number of majors fell (548). How we talk about political science matters and it directly impacts who enrolls in political science programs. Our recruitment work needs to be intentional but is often undervalued.

Strategies for recruiting prospective students

There are several potential strategies available for recruiting prospective students (that is, students who are not yet attending the institution) to attend one's institution and pursue a political science major.

Most colleges and universities already hold regular open house events during their peak recruitment periods, where students and parents visit the campus and are given an orientation to the institution, offered a preview of campus facilities, and invited to apply or discuss admissions with college representatives. If the open house events are not structured to already include an opportunity for prospective students to meet with faculty, staff, and/or current student representatives, these events would be prime opportunities to provide prospective students with such an opportunity to gain a more in-depth

appreciation of the academic and co-curricular programming associated with the major, rather than relying on marketing materials or intermediate parties to provide information about the degree program.

A visible social media presence on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram may also be a helpful platform for recruitment. Not only can social media be a vehicle for keeping current students, faculty, staff, and alumni abreast of the ongoing activities of the department; social media can also be used to advertise events to the broader community, including prospective students, and can be helpful in demonstrating the vitality of the department, particularly if it is difficult or costly to update other public-facing information sources such as the department's website. Most colleges and universities will have a dedicated marketing and communications office or team that is willing to help departments expand their social media presence and will promote social media feeds and spread social media postings through the university or college's social media channels.

Potential majors also come to college campuses for a variety of events, in some cases well before they have even started thinking of applying to college; events like summer camps are common for elementary and middle school children, while more focused, shorter events often bring teenagers to college campuses including academic competitions such as quiz bowl, mathematics tournaments, robotics competitions, and the like. These events can provide an opportunity to present prospective students with a positive impression of the institution and its programs at a stage where they are less likely to have formed strong preferences about their college options. At this stage, students may also lack firm preferences about majors and career paths, and thus may be more receptive to majors and career options they have not previously considered or been exposed to.

Inviting high school students to campus for events can be a prime occasion for recruitment. Consider contacting local high school government teachers about events such as Constitution Day, election night watch events, and speaker series. Just getting students on campus is a good way to have them think about our institution. Sometimes students' familiarity with a place is a good recruitment tactic

for potential students. Make sure that you also work with Admissions to get goodie bags for the number of participants.

Lastly, the program having a public presence in the community is a good opportunity for recruitment of students within the area. Building the relationships between faculty and high school teachers is a good way to create a pipeline for students into the program. Going to local high schools is another chance to recruit. Some high schools host speakers about specific topics, such as elections or international events. These are excellent places to show our expertise and encourage students who might be interested our subject matter. Connections with local media to get coverage of what the program is doing is another way. Students might not be watching traditional forms of media, but their parents and grandparents might. Having a public presence not only shows how our programs can engage with media but also the people in the community.

Strategies for Recruiting Current Students

Our courses are some of the best opportunities to reach current students enrolled at the institution, but not yet a part of our major. Introductory courses are a place where students can experience the ways of knowing, skill development, and interesting topics. Introductory courses are places where students who may be deciding on a major or who might be less interested or engaged with their current major are ready to be stolen. Upper division courses can also be a way to recruit students into the program. Advanced courses in Human Rights or Food Politics offer opportunities for students from a variety of majors to be engaged. Courses are a platform for recruitment when they are taught well and engage students.

Social media is another way that departments can engage students outside of our programs. Creating Facebook pages, Instagram stories, TikTok videos, and creating a culture of connection is helpful to helping students feel like they belong. Not only are students in a physical space of the classroom, students are also in digital spaces and are interested in participating and consuming media in

these spaces. Having a departmental LinkedIn page is a nice way to connect current students to alumni and open up further possibilities for internships, jobs, and networking.

Holding current event roundtable conversations is an informal recruitment tool for students who may be interested in the topics, but not yet in our programs. Examples of these programs can include discussions of the Iranian protests, the War in Ukraine, current and recent Supreme Court cases, or lack of passage of a national budget. Informally, these are places for students to gather and discuss issues as well as ask questions about what is currently going on in the world. Roundtables that can cross many different disciplines offer a unique opportunity to recruit and make our programs known across campus.

Elections are a way to get students excited about democracy and what we study. Election night watch parties are ways to get students who are interested in the election to become interested in government and politics. Discussions of elections globally can also help students who are interested in comparative and international affairs. Election night watch events/parties do not need to be extravagant. Having a cake and soda is all you really need. Creating a common experience where students can connect with one another and engage with faculty is invaluable.

Working with student clubs and organizations is another way to recruit enrolled students. Pi Sigma Alpha, the national Political Science honors society, can host peer to peer events. Students who may not be eligible for Pi Sigma Alpha can be included by having a Political Science club. Another option is recruitment through Model United Nations or Pre-Law Societies.

Current majors and minors are the best recruitment tool that we have. Our students can recruit others with their enthusiasm and inclusivity. An important aspect of recruitment of current students is the sense of belonging. While students change majors for many different reasons, students stay because they feel like they belong. In addition to belonging, students also need to feel like they matter.

Offering unique experiences is another way to recruit students into the program. Having an active Model UN that takes students to conferences, professors who take students to visit law schools, and

enriching undergraduate research programs are invaluable to recruitment. Being able to clearly identify

what is unique about your program and how students can directly engage with faculty and each other is

one of those ways. However, this model means institutional investment, if the college is not willing to

invest in unique opportunities, then faculty need to be creative in offerings that are financially accessible

for students.

Specific Strategy Models

One model that we can use is creation of a cohort. A cohort model can be done formally or

informally. Formal cohort models tend to be associated with traditional-aged, residential college students.

Some formal cohort models encourage belonging, such as having living-learning communities, where

students pursuing similar majors are grouped together in campus housing and take at least some of the

same courses together, often including residential activities associated with their degree program.

Cohorts can also be created by creating a formal, structured curriculum that students go through together,

without a residential component. Having a sequence of courses that students take can create groups of

students that study together, work together, and rely on each other outside of the classroom. A cohort

creates a community. An informal cohort model can be done through social departmental events.

Creating a departmental community where students and faculty engage and belong is valuable. A

community has meaning and shared values with boundaries for membership. Hosting formal events as

well as social events allows departments to participate in both educational and social activities that bring

the group together. Shared experiences such as traveling together, or making memories connects students

and faculty on a social level. A departmental community that shows that students matter and are

important to the success of the program is essential to creating a place where students want to be.

In addition to the academic community, we can make what we do public. Informing our students

about the work that we do outside of the classroom lets them know the role of public scholar that we also

have. In addition to departmental websites, consider other ways to share your teaching and research.

Podcasts, interviews, and public speaking engagements are all ways to show how we do what we do. Off campus events are ways to show what we do. Institutions of higher education are also focused on marketing what their current faculty are doing to a wider audience. Highlighting this work on campus and social media are ways to recruit within the institution.

Having common rituals that the department does such as end of the year party or beginning of the semester donuts and coffee. One specific ritual that Bridgewater does is to have a cookout on our Alumni weekend, where current students and alumni can mingle and meet. Creating this type of opportunity allows for connection during and after our students' college years.

Recruiting students from diverse backgrounds

In our experience, political science programs recruit students from a variety of backgrounds. While many of the same approaches will work for students regardless of their background, there are good reasons to tailor recruitment efforts to specific audiences, particularly students who historically have been underrepresented in political science. Some of this tailoring may reflect differences in student interests or perspectives; for example, international students are often interested in understanding what makes United States politics so unique, in addition to the structure of government and policymaking. For students from minority or marginalized communities, a deeper understanding the structures of inequality, drawing connections between their personal experiences and community needs, and illustrating ways to make changes in people's lives could be important for initial recruitment into the major.

There are numerous ways to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. One approach is highlighting the success of majors from diverse backgrounds in pamphlets, program websites, and social media. Another way is by providing mentorship opportunities for students, both on a peer to peer and faculty-student basis; pairing students with departmental mentors is a good opportunity for students to support one another and to create a culture of acceptance. Identifying community needs and finding ways for students to engage in helping with those needs, whether through service learning or extracurricular

volunteer activities, can help with showing how political science can be relevant to students who may think of the discipline as dealing with far-off national or international concerns rather than the needs of everyday people.

Recruitment practices may also be responsive to the broader departmental culture. In departments where there is more of an activist orientation among faculty and students (typically, but not exclusively, on the political left), recruitment efforts are likely to reflect those activist positions on matters such as the promotion of social justice initiatives inside and outside the academy. Even where faculty and students may be more inclined toward a positivist or social scientific approach to the discipline, nonetheless promotional efforts can still emphasize commitments to using the knowledge we develop to improve our communities and the broader world around us.

Students from diverse backgrounds are often first-generation college students as well, so many of the same issues that arise when attracting students whose families are unfamiliar with college and university practices and the employment prospects of college graduates will also be present when recruiting students from underrepresented groups. Additionally, first generation and students from diverse backgrounds also face family pressures and responsibilities, such as being a major contributor to family income. Other pressures of identity also come into play as students address multiple aspects of themselves and how their education can directly impact their relationships with family members.

Of course, a commitment to diversity in recruitment must also be extended into teaching practice to be effective in retaining majors; the content of courses and curriculum, including readings and other assignments, must reflect this commitment as well.

Conclusions

Recruitment is an essential part of what programs do. However, limitations on departmental or programmatic resources can impact recruitment practices. Limited faculty time and energy can directly impact what is possible for a program to do. Some of the recruitment suggestions we present are less

resource intensive, but require an additional commitment from faculty that can already be stretched thin with a multitude of responsibilities. Creating partnerships across campus, such as with admissions and alumni relations offices, and working directly with current majors to promote the program can ease the onus on faculty. With all of these recruitment techniques, we must consider what makes political science different and what benefits we provide to students. We need a vision for the future of recruitment.

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