

MSI Undergraduate Career Readiness Intervention:
Preparing UCR Political Science Majors for the Job Market

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ABSTRACT: The Department of Political Science at the University of California–Riverside put together a series of career workshops for undergraduates during AY 22-23 and AY 23-34. These workshops were intended to convey to political science majors the career choices ahead of them, put students in touch with existing UCR resources, and, more generally, to render concrete and recognizable the steps students should take in order to reach their career goals. We encountered three abiding challenges at the center of our project. These were the challenges of resolving persistent technical issues, attracting panelists, and drawing in students. The purpose of this article is to convey the steps that we took to develop these career workshops and to meet challenges so that other departments similarly positioned might benefit from our experience.

I. Introduction

A faculty committee within the Department of Political Science at the University of California–Riverside (UCR) put together a series of career workshops for undergraduates. These career workshops were conducted two times, once during AY 22-23 and again during AY 23-34. These workshops were intended to convey to political science majors the career choices they had ahead of them, put them in touch with existing UCR resources, and, more generally, to render concrete and recognizable the steps they should take in order to reach their career goals. The motivation for these career workshops crystalized around a single issue. Members of the Undergraduate Committee felt that students were too focused on law school as the next best step after graduation. The sense that we had was that political science undergraduates were resorting to law school because they were unaware of other options available to them. As it happens, there is a rich assortment of career opportunities less often talked about, some of them immediately at hand for students pursuing or holding bachelor's degrees. We wanted to introduce something of a shift in attitudes and expectations among political science students about their futures.

UCR is, generally speaking, an under-resourced institution. The members of the Undergraduate Committee, all members of the Department of Political Science, who organized these workshops constituted a humble and tenacious group of individuals. We had a limited budget and we were operating within real institutional limits. Furthermore, we had our own research, teaching, and service obligations to juggle as we saw the phases of this career intervention through to completion. The purpose of this article is to convey the steps that we took so that other departments similarly positioned might benefit from our experience. We encountered three abiding challenges at the center of our project. These were the challenges of resolving persistent technical issues, attracting panelists, and drawing in students. We had a number of successful workshops. Most successful of all, in my estimate, was our AY 22-23 career workshop on state and local politics, which, with the assistance of Ronald Loveridge, a former mayor of Riverside, included human resource representatives from local government agencies who were uniquely positioned to speak on the issue. It was like lightning in a bottle, and we will say more about this experience below. Unfortunately, this very career workshop was also—again, in our estimate—our greatest failing. This has caused us to reflect more deeply on our approach to future career workshops.

II. The Overall Structure of the Career Workshop Series

There already exist resources for students on careers related to an undergraduate degree in political science. APSA, for example, has a thorough and organized website on this. Furthermore, UCR's own Career Center offers a similar online breakdown for degrees in the social sciences. We do not know the extent to which students are utilizing these resources. However, our sense is that they are underutilized. We wanted to repackage this information and bring it to life for our students. We decided on offering six hour-long workshops open to any interested students, but primarily advertised to undergraduate students in political science. These workshops were to focus on specific topics or career sectors, so that we could have a targeted discussion addressing student interest in certain career paths. We wanted to introduce students to experienced individuals, especially individuals with whom they could relate and with whom they would feel comfortable continuing this conversation outside of the event. Though we did not overtly strive for

equitable representation, we struck a very good balance among our speakers purely as a result of our faculty networks. Over half of our panelists were women, and a significant number of them were women of color.

The workshops were spread out, usually separated by only a week, and sometimes, though much less frequently, separated by several months. During the first series of workshops, taking place in AY22-23, we were able to hold five of our intended six workshops in rapid succession: every Friday at the same time across five weeks ranging across October and November. These five workshops took place within a single quarter (which is the ten-week period into which UCR thrice divides its academic year). Looking back, I can say that this scheduling format helped us to sustain some measure of student enthusiasm: same day, same time, every week, and confined to a period of time during which student schedules remained stable. The one exception for AY 22-23 was our final workshop in the series, which for various scheduling reasons, including a system-wide strike by graduate student teaching assistants, was delayed until May 2023. In sharp contrast, during AY 23-24 we were able to hold far fewer workshops. This was in part because other obligations prevented us from making as full of a commitment to the task ahead of us. It took quite a lot of work the first time around. But this retrenchment was also intended to streamline the process, perhaps offer some workshops every other year rather than every year, and, generally speaking, make the career workshop series more efficient in its administration. Be that as it may, we were not able to build comparable interest among students in AY 23-24. The first two AY 23-24 career workshops, the first of which took place in October and the second of which took place in November, were separated by a month. They did take place in the same quarter, but they had to be scheduled on different days, one on Friday and the other on Monday. The third and final workshop for AY 23-24 took place over five months later in April 2024. As is apparent, this scheduling, which we could not avoid, likely contributed to the lack of student interest. We had not intended to offer only three career workshops. But the challenges of making these happen combined with a dearth of student participation made it sensible to limit ourselves to three total career workshops for the AY 23-24 series.

When it came to speakers, we invited panelists from among UCR administrators, our own political science faculty, and student alumni who had been successful in their chosen

fields. Flyers for the workshops were posted around campus, sent out across various social media channels, and sent directly via email to political science majors. The workshops were conducted hybridly so as to be maximally convenient for our panelists, many of whom were taking time away from their own professional responsibilities, and as accessible as possible for interested students. Speakers coming in from outside the university were offered parking passes for the day and were given information about parking options on our large campus. For in person participants, the workshops included refreshments such as water, coffee, muffins, and cookies. But many workshops included lunch such as delivered pizza, fruit salad, a crudités platter, and soft drinks. The advertisements made it clear in advance about whether lunch was provided.

We offered as many as six focused career workshops during this period. I will list their titles here:

- i. Planning Political Science Careers: What Every Major Should Know
- ii. State and Local Government: Careers for Political Science Majors
- iii. International Career Options for Political Science Majors
- iv. Graduate School for Political Science Majors
- v. Private and Non-Profit Sector Careers for Political Science Majors
- vi. Law School and Legal Careers for Political Science Majors

All six workshops were held during AY 22-23. However, only three of them were held in AY 23-24. Those which we repeated were the introductory workshop on planning a political science career, the workshop on careers in state and local government, and the workshop on graduate school options for political science majors. Most of these workshops unfolded in similar ways. We think that discussing two workshops in greater detail will give a strong idea of the overall format and content of our career workshop series.

III. Planning Political Science Careers: What Every Major Should Know

The first workshop was an overview of various professional tracks and was intended to build enthusiasm and interest for future and more focused workshops. It was entitled “Planning Political Science Careers: What Every Major Should Know.” We offered this workshop both in AY 22-23 and AY 23-24 and they followed the same format which included an introduction, four speakers, refreshments, and time for student questions. We

were able to receive a room which allowed space for food to be set up, plenty of seating, and the technology necessary for some panelists to connect via Zoom. Each of these workshops was opened by a faculty member of political science. For AY 22-23 it was Marissa Brookes, an Associate Professor, who started us off with an overview of career options. For AY 23-24 it was Joshua Wood, an Assistant Professor of Teaching. These are two members of the faculty students know well. Both iterations of the workshop included a presentation by the director of UCR's Student Engagement office, Gladis Herrera-Berkowitz, who is in charge of a variety of student-facing initiatives. However, relevant to our workshop is the fact that Student Engagement is designed to connect students to internship and research opportunities as well as guide students through the arduous process of applying to prestigious fellowships. This is a vital resource that we feel many of our students did not know about.

AY 22-23 included the point person from the UCR Career Center, Casie Vu, who specialized in careers related to the social sciences. She offered a presentation on navigating the Career Center website as well as on what services were available to students such as resume writing, borrowing professional clothes in which to conduct interviews, and internship opportunities. Casie, because of a scheduling issue, was not able to join us for AY 23-24. So we included a local celebrity who happens to be a Professor in the Department of Political Science at UCR. This is Ron Loveridge who is the former mayor of Riverside and who is the director of the Loveridge Summer Fellowship Program. The LSFP selects promising students nearing graduation to connect them with summer internships available through California public agencies and offices in Sacramento. Loveridge has maintained relationships with individuals running these agencies and offices so as to keep these opportunities open for UCR students in political science. This summer program is perhaps our department's greatest success, though almost entirely the product of Loveridge's own hard work, when it comes to students securing careers in fields related to their political science degree. Loveridge, for the purposes of this opening career workshop, was able to speak to the particulars of the fellowship such as what a desirable student application looks like, what students can expect during their experience with a state government office in Sacramento, the professional network that often results after successfully completing the program, and what this has meant for the long-term careers of some of our students.

Each workshop included two student alumni among our speakers. For AY 23-24 Andrea Mares and Eric McDermott agreed to serve as our alumni panelists, and both presented in person. Andrea Mares worked as a Board Assistant for Riverside County Third District Supervisor. She had a job in a local political office and was a recent graduate of our program. She was able to speak very concretely about her experiences as a student, her internships that prepared her for this field, and the steps she underwent to gain her current position. Eric McDermott had previously worked on a successful Riverside mayoral campaign and had recently transitioned to the private sector where he ran his own local business. Eric spoke about his experiences and also spoke more broadly about motivation, personal initiative, and the wealth of opportunities that are waiting for students. For AY 23-24 Matthew Nicolai and Amrawit Silassie, two alumni of the UCR undergraduate program in political science, agreed to present. Both joined us remotely from the east coast. Matthew was a recent graduate and was currently serving as a graduate research assistant with Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh where he specialized in digital security. He spoke of his experiences as a student, provided some explanation as to what a day in the life was like for him currently, and went so far as to provide students with a list of actionable steps they can take right now in order to get started on securing a career related to political science. These steps included building relationships with instructors, taking on internships, building out their professional network, and so on. Amrawit was located in Washington, D. C. where she worked for USAID as a Program Assistant at the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. She spoke on the central role that internships, during and after graduation, played in her ability to secure this position as well as the importance of developing relationships with political science faculty.

IV. State and Local Government: Careers for Political Science Majors

The workshop focusing on careers in local and state government took place twice. When we spoke of local government agencies we meant those in and around the city of Riverside; and when we spoke of state agencies we meant, of course, those in the state of California. Furthermore, the emphasis was on unelected positions with local and state government. The landscape of local and state government positions is complex, if not overwhelming, simply because of the sheer number and kinds of positions that are

available. Ron Loveridge organized both workshops on this topic and the panelists represented a wide variety of career paths in this area. The goal was not to map out all the career possibilities under this topic, but rather to motivate students think concretely about pursuing work in this area. Interestingly, Loveridge took two very different approaches to the AY 22-23 and AY 23-24 workshops on local and state politics.

For AY22-23 Loveridge gathered together six panelists all of whom completed UCR's degree program in political science and with whom Loveridge had worked with closely during their studies. Many of them, if not all, completed the Loveridge Summer Fellowship Program. Rob Field was the City Manager for the City of San Bernardino, which is near Riverside. Andrea Mares put in a second appearance in this workshop and was able to continue her conversation with interested students from the week prior. Cody Garman was a school teacher for Alliance College-Ready Public Schools which serves Los Angeles County. Treyland Bradley worked in the California Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development. He served as the Deputy of Sustainable Freight and Supply Chain Development. Christopher Ferguson worked in California's Department of Finance as a Program Budget Manager. Natalie Garcia worked as a Legislative Assistant for California Assemblymember Reggie Jones-Sawyer. Each of these presenters, though only briefly, was able to speak about the path that led them to these positions, what a day in their professional lives was like, and what motivated them to pursue careers in this area. All speakers attended remotely.

For AY 23-24 Loveridge switched gears. Bringing current students into conversation with successful alumni is an improvement on the informative albeit largely nebulous professional websites about careers related to political science. That was the goal for AY 22-23. However, Loveridge, this time around, took an additional step toward making a career in local and state politics a reality for our students. During AY 23-24 Loveridge put together a panel of human resource representatives from local and state agencies. These were not student alumni. Rather these were people who could speak about the exact steps that one must take in order to secure positions of this kind. They each identified the website for their particular agency which listed job openings, the process for completing an application, the career trajectory associated with certain jobs, the likelihood of being hired permanently after completing an internship, and so on. They actively recruited students

not only to apply for positions after graduation, but directed them to a wealth of rewarding government jobs and paid internships for which they were already qualified and for which they could submit applications *that very day*. Lanaya Trejo, one of our panelists, was the Career Strategy Manager for the State of California. Shondi Miller was the Assistant Director of Human Resources for Riverside County. Miriana Gonzalez was the Deputy Director of Human Resources for the City of Riverside. Princess Hester was the Administrative Services Director for the Western Riverside Council of Governments. And Heather Williams was the Assistant Superintendent within Personnel Services for the Riverside County Office of Education. All speakers attended remotely.

V. First Challenge: Technology

There are three main challenges that we faced. One of these challenges was technology. To put it mildly, it is difficult to coordinate a workshop in which panelists, some of them presenting remotely and others in person, can speak to, display slides for, and conversationally interact with an audience some of whom, again, are attending remotely and others in person. This can be done, of course. In our experience across these two years it never took place without considerable vigilance on the part of numerous players. And this vigilance in most cases needed to be exercised from inception, say, the point at which we created the Zoom link to be circulated on a particular flyer, until the very end, which we would identify as the moment, well after the end of a career workshop, when we saved a Zoom recording to the Undergraduate Committee's shared drive. Between these two moments, a lot of administrative work had to get done, a lot of good will and patience needed to be exercised, and a lot of luck had to be bestowed on us from above. Or at least this is what it felt like as we attempted to deliver on our commitment to this series of career workshops.

It is in this area that UCR's status as an under-resourced institution is palpable. While our Undergraduate Committee had sufficient funds to hire a graduate student for the purposes of helping us coordinate the AY 22-23 workshop series, this extra set of hands, capable though they were, was not enough. We often found ourselves scrambling because a Zoom link was no longer working, the person whose laptop happened to serve as the nucleus for a workshop that day did not have the necessary Zoom privileges

(and, in some cases, the person who had the necessary privileges was away), or the hardware in a classroom was either not working or working unexpectedly. University staff, reachable by phone and sometimes able to come directly to the room where the workshop took place, were indeed available for such instances, but I cannot say that the staff, largely undergraduate students working part time, are sufficiently trained to handle the variety of technological issues that we encountered. It seemed that, for us, the most reliable source of technological support was someone, a member of our Undergraduate Committee, who had, by chance, the know-how or the ingenuity to solve a problem on the spot. A good example of this issue, one combining the lack of staff and an unexpected technological problem, is the simple fact that panelists themselves, many of whom are not located on campus, encountered technical difficulties. Our solution was to provide panelists with the cell phone number for a member of the Undergraduate Committee who was available to assist during a given workshop. However, because we are faculty and not technology experts, the support we could provide our gracious speakers was modest to say the least. In one case, we fielded numerous calls from panelists who could not access an otherwise functioning Zoom link. It took considerable trial and error to figure out what was going wrong. The best we could do was to call our panelists one at a time and then walk them through the seemingly arbitrary process of selecting a series of options that, by chance, enabled them to join the Zoom meeting. Unfortunately, because we ourselves have a number of competing obligations, sometimes the specific faculty member hosting the workshop that week was tasked with managing all or some combination of these responsibilities on their own. Be that as it may, we made it work. But it was never easy, we never felt like we had the institutional support that we needed, and, though we had some successes, these factors took a toll on our ability to deliver the kind of career workshops that we had envisioned.

VI. Second Challenge: Securing Panelists

The second challenge that we faced was finding and gaining commitment from prospective panelists. This challenge is itself partially related to the issues presented by technology. We were not only asking panelists to make time to be present for our career workshop—which, for some of them, meant taking time away from other professional obligations or managing a schedule in a different timezone and, for a small number of them,

commuting to our campus—but we were asking them to participate in what might be a less than fluid technological experience. One instance stands out to us. A panelist kindly joined us in person, bringing with them a flash drive containing a file with their slides. However, these slides, as the workshop host discovered through a lengthy period of trial and error, proved to be inaccessible for one reason or another. The panelist had no choice but to stand aside and wait while a faculty member, doing their best but ultimately unprepared for such an event, tried in vain to come up with a fix. We settled, at the last minute, on accessing a website, which, by clicking through to various pages, would serve as the slide deck for the presentation. The website, though related to the panelist's field of expertise, nevertheless did not contain information related to the talk they had planned to give. Yet this was the best we could do in the moment with the resources we had. Though we were excited about the impact these workshops would have on political science students, experiences such as this made us feel slightly uneasy in requesting participation from prospective panelists.

There is a still more practical challenge concerning the issue of securing panelists for the workshop series. Members of the Undergraduate Committee needed to actually *know* people who would be suitable panelists. However, this typically meant much more. Members of the Undergraduate Committee needed to know people who, as it were, *owed a favor* or who already had some *personal investment* in helping political science students. The UCR administrators who participated in our workshops, thankfully, were already committed to this form of student outreach. Bringing these members of our university on board was typically no trouble at all. But many of our other panelists were individuals that some member of the Undergraduate Committee or, extending outward in our network, some member of the Department of Political Science knew personally or professionally. As a department, we do not have information about where our alumni are. Despite efforts to resolve this issue through official channels—such as through Career Services, the Development Office, or the UCR Alumni Association—we have been unable to create a formal list of former students, where they are in their professional lives, and their contact information. So in drawing alumni participants to our career workshop series we had to rely on the relationships that faculty had built and sustained with former students. Relationships such as these are not an organic part of the job which meant that

we found ourselves leaning on specific faculty members who, because of their disposition or dedication, had a wealth of personal contacts from which to draw. Therefore this was not an entirely fair recruitment process and future recruitment will, in all likelihood, be left up to chance relationships that our faculty have managed to build with our students.

VII. Third Challenge: Student Interest

The final challenge that we encountered was motivating student participation. This does not concern the participation of student alumni as panelists. Rather the issue in this case concerns attracting interest among current political science students, that is, among the students for whom these career workshops were intended. We had roughly 900 undergraduate students majoring in political science. Moreover, no UCR students regardless of their major or program of study were discouraged, much less prevented, from joining us. The workshops were well-advertised through social media channels, through emails to political science majors, through flyers around campus, and, finally, through digital as well as in-person announcements in our own political science courses (many of which had hundreds of students enrolled). As mentioned above, many of these workshops included lunch, and all of them were scheduled to take place during the lunch hour. We felt that we had covered our bases when it came to making students aware of these events and motivating their participation.

Our highest attendance occurred in the workshop which set off the initiative. On this date, during AY 22-23, at peak attendance, 52 students were present across in person and remote participants. Afterward student participation in AY 22-23 career workshops declined steadily, dropping to as few as 17. The same trend held for AY 23-24 though this series began at the modest height of 20 students present during the opening workshop. See the table below for detailed student attendance information.

Student Attendance Data		
Peak Attendance Combining In Person and Remote Students		
	AY 2022-23	AY 2023-24
i. Planning Political Science Careers: What Every Major Should Know	52	20
ii. State and Local Government: Careers for Political Science Majors	36	2
iii. International Career Options for Political Science Majors	27	N/A
iv. Graduate School for Political Science Majors	21	15
v. Private and Non-Profit Sector Careers for Political Science Majors	17	N/A
vi. Law School and Legal Careers for Political Science Majors	No Data	N/A

At the very lowest point of student attendance during the workshop series as a whole, as few as 2 students were present. In that very unfortunate case, two individuals were present remotely and just for a few moments. We can only surmise that they were students. This occurred for Ron Loveridge's AY 23-24 career workshop which, considering its panelists and their zeal for job recruitment, was, in our estimate, a high point for our series. The few of us who could be present for this particular workshop listened intently as panelists delivered invaluable information with immediate relevance to students. However, they spoke to a room—amply supplied with pizza, sodas, coffee, and other refreshments—which contained not one student. This gave us serious pause. As a result, for AY 23-24 we continued with one more workshop whose intricate planning had already been completed, but we did not initiate any further preparation for the remaining workshops. Though we had by now become familiar with the processes of building these workshops, we have ceased to implement for AY 24-25. The members of the Undergraduate Committee are in the process of regrouping to consider whether we will resume this work and, if so, in what capacity. Your suggestions and insights would be invaluable to us.