

## Cohort and Career: Cross-Class Bonds and Foreign Policy Professional Development

William Schlickemaier  
Department of Government  
Georgetown University  
8 February 2025

Presented at the 2025 American Political Science Association Teaching and Learning Conference

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views of any component of the US Government.*

What is the point of college teaching? This question lies at the heart of current debates and existential worries about the purpose of the university. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual innovation of the research institution imported from Germany to Johns Hopkins, students, parents, educators, and employers have all asked why we educate students.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the value provided by a liberal arts education for character formation and civic-mindedness, the contemporary consensus is that the purpose of education is to prepare students for the workforce. This requirement sits in tension with the dominant focus, particularly at R-1 universities, on research among the tenured and tenure-track faculty, a focus that pushes senior and ambitious faculty away from an undergraduate focus toward graduate research seminars that perpetuate their academic genealogy. Undergraduate education then is left in the hands of non-tenure track and adjunct faculty, who juggle their teaching responsibilities with everything else they carry, be that alternate work or multiple campuses.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this bifurcation within the faculty ranks creates opportunities. Non-tenured faculty can explore alternative areas of focus in undergraduate education – particularly a focus on career development, something that their students desperately need. As student loan debt burdens explode and credentials for work increasingly go beyond a four-year degree to include additional graduate school (and the concomitant debt burdens), undergraduates increasingly need greater and more diverse forms of support to succeed. And universities will increasingly face pressure to model student success – defined by enabling their graduates to find fulfilling careers.

This paper offers a vision for how to model and structure that success. The politics career development “hidden curriculum” – as demonstrated by successful practitioners of the political and policy arts – has two individually necessary but jointly sufficient components: credible skills and credible networks.<sup>3</sup> As teachers of politics, we have to enable our students to build and leverage both.

I have been fortunate even as an adjunct to build this model in practice at Georgetown University. I recognize that I have privilege at Georgetown because of its access to policy and political avenues, but I will argue in this paper that there are generalizable models from what I have built to work in a range of political and policy teaching environments. My key observation is the value of cohorts – groups of students that remain connected through their shared

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Kirby, *Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Michael S. Roth, *The Student: A Short History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of a hidden curriculum, see for example Elena Barham and Colleen Wood, “Teaching the Hidden Curriculum in Political Science,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 55, no. 2 (April 2022): 324–28; Jay Phelan and Terry Burnham, *The Secret Syllabus: A Guide to the Unwritten Rules of College Success* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Anthony Abraham Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

experience in a class over time, that creates commonalities to enable the networking based on class-taught skills to identify early career opportunities.

### **Politics and Policy Career Development Challenges**

Three fundamental challenges shape the ability of undergraduate students to start careers in politics and policy.

First, in an increasingly competitive job market, simple skill development is insufficient to qualify for a job. Unlike in technical fields where tests can evaluate “chops,” the skills necessary for political or policy success, such as effective writing, briefing, and critical thinking, do not easily appear on a resume or cover letter.<sup>4</sup> Grades in politics and policy classes do not demonstrate mastery and many if not most recommendation letters from faculty do not appreciate the actual needed skills for these job markets.

This competitive job market creates a second fundamental challenge. As graduate school enrollment has exploded, jobs where an undergraduate degree would suffice now mandate—or at least will consider and often prioritize—a graduate degree instead. As a graduate degree often appears to confer both greater specialized skill development and enhanced professional networking, undergraduates are then forced into an “arms race” with graduate students for limited jobs. Choosing thus to pursue graduate education creates a debt trap where undergraduates are forced to spend years “cash flow negative,” not earning and more often increasing their debt burden, which further closes off a number of important political and policy job opportunities. This vicious cycle is an equity threat because students with resources and generational wealth are better postured to leapfrog their first-generation or other peers who cannot afford to defer earnings.<sup>5</sup>

Third, too often faculty are themselves ill equipped to provide the kind of tailored career advice students would need to move from an undergraduate education to political or policy success. Many tenure-track or tenured faculty go straight from their undergraduate degrees into doctoral coursework, the better to move into the job market at a younger age. Doing so, however, teaches them the skills to mentor future academics, not future political or policy professionals. Tenure incentives further deprioritize this – in today’s publish or perish marketplace, mentoring falls even below teaching on the list of priority tasks that a faculty member needs to secure approval and promotion.

These three challenges – limited objective criteria to demonstrate mastery of relevant skills, the arms race between graduate programs and undergraduate programs, and misaligned incentives for faculty mentoring – create a vicious cycle where undergraduates in political science and

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<sup>4</sup> There are, however, some technical skills that do matter, including fluency in foreign languages, coding, and data analysis. However, as large language models scale, it is unclear how critical these will be in the future.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Abraham Jack, *Class Dismissed: When Colleges Ignore Inequality and Students Pay the Price* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).

policy too often lack the ability to move into the workforce. Some students are able to do so by dint of a location premium, being in Washington DC or a similar politically relevant metropolitan area. But even this has its limits.

### What Do Politics and Policy Students Want?

As a general rule, political science, government, and politics majors do not select those majors to maximize their potential earnings. While a significant proportion choose law school after graduation, those who are passionate about the topics are so because they want to be “in the arena.” With the possible exception of political theorists, undergraduate politics students want to *do* politics and policy. Particularly students who choose upper level coursework as opposed to just surveys, they want to be able to have an impact and to make change by understanding the craft, the art, and the means of the political and the policy realms.

At its heart, students want to break into the space. They want to be able to succeed, and they want to be able to progress. They want rewarding work, and they want to believe that the time they have invested in their undergraduate education “paid off” in their post-graduate lives.

The challenges described above point to the fact that students are not provided with what they need to gain what they want. Too often we take the undergraduate curriculum for granted.<sup>6</sup> Beyond that, we need to identify the specific things that students need to be able to succeed in the political and policy arenas.<sup>7</sup> I argue that there are two critical needs: credible skills and credible networks. These represent the “hidden curriculum” of the study of politics and policy, particularly in its applied sense. Theorems and broad concepts are less critical than the ability to take a toolkit of heuristics and apply them in written and oral communication while leveraging those heuristics for critical reading and synthesis.<sup>8</sup> Demonstration of these skills makes them credible to potential employers. Transmission of those credible skills, meanwhile,

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew A. Szarejko and Matthew E. Carnes, “Assessing an Undergraduate Curriculum: The Evolving Roles of Subfields, Methods, Ethics, and Writing for Government Majors,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 178–82; Maureen Feeley and Renée Van Vechten, “Whither the Political Science Major? Curricular Design and Program Learning Outcomes at 110 US Colleges and Universities,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 54, no. 2 (April 2021): 363–67; E. Fletcher McClellan, “Curriculum Theory and the Undergraduate Political Science Major: Toward a Contingency Approach,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 54, no. 2 (April 2021): 368–72.

<sup>7</sup> Bidisha Biswas and Virginia Haufler, “What Can I Do with This Class? Building Employment-Related Skills in International Relations Courses,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 16, no. 1 (2020): 67–78; Jessica D. Blankshain, David A. Cooper, and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Bridging the Other Side of the Gap: Teaching ‘Practical Theory’ to Future Practitioners,” *International Studies Perspectives* 22, no. 2 (May 2021): 240–60; Jonas B. Bunte, “Why Do Students Enroll in Political Science Courses?,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 52, no. 2 (April 2019): 353–60.

<sup>8</sup> One alumna of GOVT 2604 shared that from her experience as a Hill staffer, reading at speed, quality writing, and briefing were more critical than theories or concepts. For more, see Jennifer Bachner, “Refocusing Methods Courses on Workplace Applications,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 16, no. 2 (2020): 257–61; Andrea Betti, Pablo Biderbost, and Aurora García Domonte, “Developing Students’ ‘Soft Skills’ through the Flipped Classroom: Evidence from an International Studies Class,” *International Studies Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (February 2022): 1–24; Joel Moore and Sharmaine Loh, “Alumni Assessments of Soft Skill Formation in an Extended Simulation,” *International Studies Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (February 2022): 25–40.

relies on credible networks – ways in which students can show that they have crossed a certain threshold or bar of vetting for suitability in the political or policy space.

Developing syllabi that encourage these credible skills is relatively simple. Assignments that combine oral presentations and briefings with policy-length memoranda (500 words as opposed to 10-20 pages, leveraging an inverted pyramid style) with critical reading relying on a base of foundational concepts, including but not limited to data literacy, are possible in any political science class.<sup>9</sup> Developing credible networks in support of making students credible is the harder part, and the focus of the rest of this paper. By combining credible networks with credible skills, political science, government, and policy departments can place their students in a greater position to succeed without additional debt burdens or hidden advantages.

### Theorizing Political and Policy Career Development

Two research programs from sociology—weak ties and structural holes—underscore the ways in which networks shape career success, particularly in fields like politics and policy that rely on connections as much as if not more than technical fields. By exploring these literatures and applying them to the undergraduate experience, we can showcase the ways in which network development is tractable and critical.

Mark Granovetter developed the “weak ties” model in sociology when exploring career development. In *Getting a Job*, his book-length treatment of the role of weak ties, he found that in his case study—job prospects for white-collar work in Newton, MA—secondary or “weak” ties mattered as much as if not more than close ties like family connections or formal links.<sup>10</sup> Personal contacts were the predominant method of finding out about jobs, with the best jobs even more often found in this way.<sup>11</sup> These networks provided a level of credibility because of the linkage, the ability to be assured of some level of knowledge or understanding, without being so dense that they resembled kin networks.

Pairing Granovetter’s insights with those of Ronald Burt helps us understand the asymmetries between those who effectively leverage these networks and those who do not. In *Structural Holes*, Burt builds on Granovetter’s work to argue that “the spread of information on new ideas and opportunities... must come through the weak ties that connect people in separate clusters.”<sup>12</sup> Burt argues, moreover, that competitive advantage comes from having players who understand the value that structural holes provide within these networks, both in control over

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<sup>9</sup> The inverted pyramid style is common in both journalism and policy writing (including military communications and intelligence analyses) where a “bottom line up front” captures the key message for a busy reader followed by supporting information below.

<sup>10</sup> Mark S. Granovetter, *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1995); Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–80.

<sup>11</sup> Granovetter, *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*, 11, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald S. Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 26.

the flow of information and in “being exposed to more rewarding opportunities.”<sup>13</sup> Players who understand the value of networks and of shaping them for strategic advantage are more likely to derive the benefits—including career benefits—that both Granovetter and Burt describe.

How, then, do we create the weak ties and structural holes that enable entrepreneurs to gain career advantage? If Granovetter and Burt are correct, there is such a thing as too tight a network, too close a set of relations where information will not effectively flow. This includes a family, for example. At the same time, there is also too diffuse a network, where there is not enough commonality for the connections to be effectively credible.

Classroom size begins to help us think about the value of network density. A massive open online course (MOOC) is too diffuse a network to effectively build ties. A small seminar may be too small or narrow. Indeed, even a single semester’s class may be too small a pool for effective information flow over time, and a single faculty member is likely too narrow, regardless of their network of contacts, to build a network on their own.

### **The Cohort Development Answer**

I argue that the way to build these networks of weak ties, leveraging structural holes, is by building alumni networks in classes that themselves demonstrate credible skills. Doing so creates a flywheel effect where success in internship or job placement creates incentives for future placements. In the following section, I use the case of a class I developed at Georgetown University, GOVT 2604 (Contemporary US Foreign Policy) as an example of how this can be done.

I use GOVT 2604 both because of demonstrated success in fielding this model over nearly five years and because it sits in a “sweet spot” within Georgetown’s undergraduate curriculum. 1000 level classes at Georgetown are the four large surveys—1600, for example, which I also teach, is Introduction to International Relations. 3000 and 4000 classes are seminars—I teach a senior seminar on the National Security Council, GOVT 4626. 2000 level classes are colloquia of approximately 50-75 students each that go deeper than introductory surveys. 1600 serves as an initial screening function particularly for first- and second-year students, helping them understand whether the broad field of international relations speaks to them, and giving them an initial conceptual and theoretical toolkit. Within the international relations subfield, the 2600 series of courses focus on subfields – international security, international law, international political economy, and in the case of 2604, US foreign policy.

As a 50-55 student class with a mix of seniors, juniors, and second-year students, GOVT 2604 is large enough to allow for the diffusion of knowledge and information but small enough to build bonds. To further build bonds, 2604 organizes around the State Department’s regional bureau structure, within which six groupings cover the entire world. All assignments focus on US policy toward a country within that bureau over the course of the semester. This forces students to

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<sup>13</sup> Burt, 30, 34.

be more creative and diminishes the appeal of plagiarism, and also takes advantage of any pre-existing language, travel, or study experience in that region. Students in every class have to brief out group discussions on a common prompt, which forces them to reckon with each others' perspectives. At multiple times during the semester, we create competitions among the bureaus, heightening the bonds and the "play" that can emerge from active learning.

But as discussed above, a single class is insufficient to build the kinds of crossover ties that enable career success. I therefore built an alumni engagement program that supercharged the network dynamics of the course.

### **Advantages and Challenges of Alumni Engagement in a Class**

Since the fall of 2020, I have been the only instructor at Georgetown for GOVT 2604. This has allowed me to build a certain identity in the class that stretches beyond just a curriculum or series of papers.<sup>14</sup> Further, the design of 2604 since I began teaching it in 2020 allowed me to identify an additional advantage – leveraging pre-existing regional interest that deepens ties over time.

Because the bureau structure is fixed across semesters, students who are passionate about the Middle East, for example, have four years of alumni (cohorts). They have often taken other classes in history, foreign languages, or area studies together, and their common interests give them a base of understanding on how to pursue specific class objectives and to leverage them for career interests.

This system only works, however, if alumni are willing to participate. This requires a certain amount of "yield," because not all students who take a US foreign policy class choose to pursue political or policy focused careers. A number go on to law school or decide to pursue other interests. Even if students do pursue careers related to US foreign policy, they have to feel a sufficient bond to want to remain part of the class in future semesters. Design and communications serve to build these bonds.

First, the bureau design of the course enables closer knit bonds between alumni and current students. Second, rather than rely on University-provided technology for class collaboration, the class uses a Discord server, which allows alumni who are no longer students to participate in class discussions and listen to lectures. Third, I maintain an alumni email list to further engage with former students and identify opportunities for them to weigh in on class-related matters.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, I have identified moments during the course of the semester where alumni can participate in competitions and other active learning moments within the class; often recent alumni remark how they looked forward to the ability to return for these moments from

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<sup>14</sup> The spring 2025 semester will be my sixth running of GOVT 2604. I have also taught GOVT 1600 five times as of spring 2025, and GOVT 4626 once.

<sup>15</sup> As an example, I shared a draft of this conference paper with 2604 alumni for their thoughts before submitting it to this conference. This is the second conference paper I have workshopped with former students – the first was a paper building on a concept developed in class I presented at the 2022 annual meeting of ISA-Northeast.

when they were current students. Finally, as the alumni pool has grown, students have volunteered to serve as bureau mentors, providing more direct support over time.

The alumni connections are also integral in creating a virtuous cycle for future students by reflecting alumni experiences back into the syllabus of a class in future semesters. Having theories, concepts, topics, and techniques validated—or discarded—by alumni professional experience provides a greater validation for those alumni to be able to speak to the value of the class experience when bringing current and future students forward.

This all sounds lovely, but it is irrelevant to the matter at hand if there are not direct implications for students' careers. Here, startup costs on the instructor's part can pay off over time. I invested significant time in career development support in my first three semesters teaching this class. By providing tailored support with resume reviews, letters of recommendation, counseling, and connections to internships and early-stage jobs, I was able to launch early alumni from the class into the political and policy world in ways that created incentives for them to "pay it forward." This mentoring work is not unique to academia, but it is increasingly required.

### **A Specific Focus – The Internship Arms Race**

Over the last year it has become clear that finding and securing an internship is harder than ever. The Business-Higher Education Forum found in September 2024 that nearly half of undergraduate students who wanted to intern were unable to do so.<sup>16</sup> To respond, an increasing number of universities are opening Washington, DC campuses to try and create "beachheads" for internships during the academic year to manage the summer rush.<sup>17</sup>

Students want internships.<sup>18</sup> As Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias and Arthur Auerbach have shown, students gained from challenging opportunities and the development of new skills and knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to this "arms race" dynamic, however, internship providers are more selective and seek these skills in advance as opposed to allowing students to develop them. Further, the sheer volume of applications is leaving even well qualified students on the side.

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Palmer, "There Aren't Enough Internships to Go Around," *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), September 10, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/careers/2024/09/10/there-arent-enough-internships-go-around>.

<sup>17</sup> Jocelyn Frelser, "Does Careerism Have to Ruin College?," *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), December 17, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/12/17/does-careerism-have-ruin-college-opinion>; Diane J. Lowenthal and Jeffrey K. Sosland, "Making the Grade: How a Semester in Washington May Influence Future Academic Performance," *Journal of Political Science Education* 3, no. 2 (2007): 143–60.

<sup>18</sup> Beyond this, internships also often serve as a screening function for suitability for work, particularly in the demonstration of career competencies. On those competencies, see Ashley Mowreader, "Listen: Teaching Career Competencies In On-Campus Work," *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), October 30, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2024/10/30/podcast-professional-development-student-workers>.

<sup>19</sup> Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias and Arthur H. Auerbach, "Evaluating the Design and Benefits of Internship Programs," *Journal of Political Science Education* 18, no. 4 (2022): 584–604.

One student in GOVT 2604 put in 30 internship applications for summer opportunities and from those received one interview.

As teachers and mentors, we have a responsibility to our students to ensure that they can gain the internships that will allow them professional—and for that matter personal—satisfaction and growth. Networks of alumni are one of the strongest means by which students rise to the top of the application pile. This may appear unfair, but it is also realistic. A reference or recommendation from within an office or agency is the surest way to vet quality in the political or policy space.

Leveraging relatively recent alumni of a class provides a significant advantage in the internship space because current interns may be positioned to tee up the next year's applicants. By connecting students to hiring managers or by providing references, they bring recent knowledge of the skills and expertise from class **and** the skills and expertise valued in an office together to credibly advocate for a future cohort. When this works, it creates a culture of mutual support where students gain those weak tie links to advance in their career aspirations.

### **The Adjunct Advantage**

As an adjunct lecturer with a full time job in the US Government, I have certain advantages I can bring to bear for career development support beyond that of a tenured professor—or for that matter for a university's career center<sup>20</sup>. Because I focus on national security and foreign policy, my experiences and professional networks give me a certain level of credibility in being able to advocate for my students and to make the case that the skills I am building are professionally relevant. At the same time, having a PhD in international relations means that I have the theoretical credibility to teach these classes as opposed to being “just a policy person.” Georgetown also offered me the opportunity to build a pipeline into this class by teaching the large (200-student) introductory IR survey class, GOVT 1600.

This combination of policy/government experience and a PhD is too often absent in the academy. There are too few incentives for political or policy professionals to spend years researching and writing a doctoral dissertation. And tenure and career incentives push many faculty away from political or policy positions. That said, as the “alt-ac” community is growing and as tenure lines become scarcer, these hybrid faculty roles may be more common, not less, especially in the undergraduate teaching space.<sup>21</sup> As such, there is a chance to make a virtue of

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<sup>20</sup> J. Michael Despeaux, H. Gibbs Knotts, and Jennifer S. Schiff, “The Power of Partnerships: Exploring the Relationship between Campus Career Centers and Political Science Departments,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 10, no. 1 (2014): 37–47. Despite this article, my experience has shown a dearth of career center support for politics and policy students because of the specialized networks needed to excel in the space.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer K. Benz, “Reflect, Then Prepare for a Career Outside the Academy,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49, no. 3 (July 2016): 504–6; Brenda Seaver, “From the Ivory Tower to the CIA: Reflections from a Career Intelligence Analyst,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49, no. 3 (July 2016): 527–30.

necessity. Beyond this, scholars have written about their experiences in local and national politics, which can also build out credible pathways that do not require a Washington address.<sup>22</sup>

At a more radical level, there is an opportunity to discuss the “unbundling” of politics/policy undergraduate education from the broader university construct. Since Johns Hopkins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US research university has sought to bring research and teaching together, but at least since the 1950s research has dominated over teaching in career advancement.<sup>23</sup> If the arguments above about career development are accurate, and if non-research faculty (a mix of adjuncts and full time non-tenure line faculty) increasingly dominate undergraduate teaching, then perhaps universities should more aggressively develop and recruit “scholar-practitioners” as opposed to presuming that all political science PhD programs should look the same.

## Culture Matters

Building any institution requires significant investment in culture and practices.<sup>24</sup> Creating group cohesion that lasts beyond the end of a semester takes work. It is also inherently a social practice – an instructor can shape the culture of an institution like a class that endures beyond one semester but it requires the collective work of an instructor and students together. At its best, this becomes co-creation, taking active learning strategies to the next level.<sup>25</sup> But even if it does not reach to this level, shared practices over time make a difference in building the bonds that bring students back beyond the “mere” career benefit of a class.

Because the first two semesters of GOVT 2604 were on Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic, students had paradoxically more time to engage with the instructor and each other, because being stuck at home during the 2020-2021 academic year, they were left with classes as a social link into the university. As an upper level class, they had already experienced university life (except those who transferred during the pandemic) and as such were able to bring preexisting

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<sup>22</sup> Leighton Andrews, “Telling Governance Stories: From Lecturer, to Minister, and Back!,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 165–68; Victoria A. Farrar-Myers, “The Political Scientist Candidate: From Scholarship to the Campaign,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 151–53; Marty P. Jordan and Charles S. Matzke, “A Roadmap for Establishing a Successful Internship Program in State Capitals and Beyond,” *Journal of Political Science Education* Forthcoming (2024); David Lublin, “Five Lessons from the Mayor’s Desk,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 169–72; Mathew Manweller, “Introduction to Academics in the Arena: Political Scientists Who Have Served in Elected Office,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 141–46; Robert Maranto, “A Political Scientist Runs for School Board,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 154–58; David P. Redlawsk, “Political Scientist or Politician: Why Not Be Both?,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 147–50.

<sup>23</sup> Kirby, *Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China*; Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on this is vast – examples include Lisa Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 713–28; Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (April 1986): 273–86; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>25</sup> Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis, *The New College Classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 2021).

bonds into their groups. This allowed us to begin to build that class culture before coming back to campus for in-person learning. Further, because many of the first students were juniors or sophomores, they returned to campus in the fall of 2021 able to play that initial mentoring role, as opposed to students who graduated remotely.

### Losing the Liberal Arts Luxury

The greatest critique of this approach proposed above is a retreat from the traditional liberal arts education. In recent years, students, parents, and faculty have all bemoaned the rise of “careerism” on college campuses.<sup>26</sup> And while I myself have criticized too heavy a focus on pre-professionalism in college, especially in students eagerly angling for management consulting roles, I must confess that I increasingly have to take the liberal arts education as a luxury good, one available to those students who already enjoy such structural privilege that they do not need to “upskill” themselves to compete. Were it the case that first-generation students, for example, would be immediately competitive for good jobs in the political and policy space upon graduating college regardless of the skills, knowledge, and networks they have developed, then I would be the first in line to advocate for a liberal arts, indeed a Great Books curriculum.<sup>27</sup>

But that is not how the job market works these days. If someone enjoys a liberal arts education for four years, they are either going on to graduate study—which for a first-generation student means at least additional time before making money, if not ruinous debt—or they are relying on networks to bootstrap themselves into a job.<sup>28</sup> There are therefore equity reasons to ensure that all students can potentially move into competitive jobs in politics and policy, especially as an array of research shows that more diverse perspectives, be those socioeconomic, political, demographic, or other, lead to higher quality decisions over time in complex environments like the political.<sup>29</sup>

Further, spreading these perspectives beyond the Beltway is also critical to avoid groupthink<sup>30</sup>. Programs like the Michael Morell Center at the University of Akron or the University of Mount Union’s National Security and Intelligence Analysis program, to name two small examples of schools in Ohio, are cases of bringing students in to learn about, and ideally to move into

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<sup>26</sup> Lily Halbert-Alexander, “Excessive Careerism Is Leading Us Astray from the Humanities,” *The Daily Princetonian*, November 12, 2024, <https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2024/11/princeton-opinion-column-careerism-career-humanities-ai-study>; Isabella Glassman, “Careerism Is Ruining College,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2024, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/24/opinion/college-linkedin-finance-consulting.html>; Frelrier, “Does Careerism Have to Ruin College?”; Jennifer Breheny Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What to Do About It* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2023); Lauren A. Rivera, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Jack, *Class Dismissed: When Colleges Ignore Inequality and Students Pay the Price*.

<sup>29</sup> Scott E. Page, *Diversity and Complexity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Evan Mandery, *Poison Ivy: How Elite Colleges Divide Us* (New York: The New Press, 2022).

positions of responsibility in, the national security space.<sup>31</sup> Models like the cohort system described here make it more likely that these smaller, non-DC programs can crack into the foreign policy and national security space.

### **Putting This In Practice: Simple Steps**

In this section I offer a relatively simple design model for how to build a cohort and career development system for a political science or government department. Critically, this is not a program that works for the wide breadth of political or policy careers – it would need to be focused on a specific domain. Piloting multiple of these within a single program can create opportunities to attract better students, build stronger relationships with the subjects of our research and teaching, and improve student outcomes.

#### *Step 1: Identify the Level*

As noted earlier, the cohort development model does not work for introductory survey classes.<sup>32</sup> It is optimized for second-level courses, be those on IR subfields, components of American government, or elements of comparative politics. Faculty teaching these second-level courses should partner with—or ideally also teach—introductory surveys within their subfields of politics as “funnels” into these second-level courses, providing the basic concepts and models necessary for application. Introductory surveys serve as a screen to identify students who want to go deeper, as opposed to those for whom the subfield is of little interest. That said, there is value in being explicit in a survey that there are career opportunities in second-level courses.

Critically, the second level course must be an area where the teaching faculty has both actual expertise and some level of network connections into the field of study.<sup>33</sup> There is little value in offering to build a cohort in a class on Congressional politics without connections on Capitol Hill or in the Congressional campaign industry.

#### *Step 2: Syllabus Design*

Syllabi for second-level classes aimed at cohort and career development require a handful of key pedagogical steps:

- 1) They need subgroups to lead to continuity over time that is not at a class-wide level. This is particularly important for larger teaching and research universities as opposed to

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Grossman and Francis Schortgen, “Building a National Security Program at a Small School: Identifying Opportunities and Overcoming Challenges,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 12, no. 3 (2016): 318–34. On the Akron program, see <https://www.uakron.edu/ciss/index.dot>

<sup>32</sup> The only potential exception for this is a survey class with discussion sections, those sections of which could yield cohorts over time. However, the size of discussion sections as opposed to a cohort in a 50-student class is significantly greater, and most lead instructors do not lead discussion sections, the TAs of which shift every semester.

<sup>33</sup> See, as an example, Jordan and Matzke, “A Roadmap for Establishing a Successful Internship Program in State Capitals and Beyond.”

small colleges where a whole second-level class could be less than 20 students. Even there, in a class on Congress, one could design a House and a Senate group, or House Republicans, House Democrats, Senate Republicans, and Senate Democrats, as an example.<sup>34</sup>

- 2) The subgroups need to engage regularly, both in and out of class. This is important for building the pathways for students to connect with their future classmates. This can come through regular clustered seating, group discussions ever week, or asynchronous collaboration via Google Docs or other platforms.
- 3) The assignments for class must be practice-relevant. Short briefings, memos, and rapid response projects are more likely to resonate with practitioners than long research papers, which are far more relevant for pre-academic tracks. The level of quantitative work for assignments depends on the nature of the field – an elections class would have far more data analysis than a US foreign policy class (though there could be exceptions both ways!)
- 4) The class should have at least one collaborative platform that is not limited by current registration. I used Discord for GOVT 2604, but there are a variety of social and collaborative platforms available, from Microsoft Teams to Google Workplace, that can enable alumni to eventually “pile on.” This does not eliminate the need for a University-provided learning management system, but supplements it.

### *Step 3: Build the Network*

When creating a cohort and career program, the faculty member is always the starting point in building the first connections. Alumni will allow the network to scale, but without initial contacts, current students and alumni will see little value in engaging in network development. The faculty member should reach out to their colleagues and contacts within the field in question, share the plan for building a career development model in the second-level class, and share the syllabus for the second-level class with requests for feedback, both on assigned readings and **especially** on assignments. Gaining feedback from practitioners in the field both validates the syllabus with them and with the students planning to take the class.

### *Step 4: Pilot the Class*

Understand that the first time you build a cohort and career development model based class, it may appear different from before. If you have the opportunity to influence the students who enroll in this first class, do so. You will need a critical mass of students interested in the specific topic and ready to continue to play a role in it after the class is over. It does not need to be the full class, but at least half should have a focused interest. I benefited enormously from the bias within Georgetown’s student population, where the School of Foreign Service and the Government Department heavily track into the foreign policy and national security space. At schools removed from DC, this may be a harder task.

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<sup>34</sup> Simulations are one way to apply this in practice over time. See William W. Newmann and William T. Christiansen, “Simulating the US National Security Interagency Process: Solid Foundations and a Method of Assessment,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 19, no. 2 (2023): 331–48; Kelly Siegel-Stechler and Gretchen Gee, “Political and International Affairs Simulations and College Students’ Civic Development,” *International Studies Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (May 2023): 115–27.

It is further important to clearly signal why assignments and readings are given. In GOVT 2604, I would regularly clarify that I assign readings from *Foreign Affairs* as opposed to more heterodox readings because I see that journal as “the house organ of the American foreign policy establishment,” and I argue that students who want to engage and play in that space need to know that literature, whether they agree with it or not. I would seek to foster heterodox views in class but would base the readings on the professional development benefits such readings would provide. In the same way, I would make clear that the writing expectations for class were clearly drawn from professional experience and validation from colleagues. With respect to assignments, students are often not prepared for policy writing or briefing, and they may require some level of coaching, either from the faculty member or (so much the better) from professional colleagues who would validate the faculty member’s approach.

#### *Step 5: Coaching and Referral*

Students, like all people, respond to incentives. If students want jobs or access to professional advancement and a faculty member is able to help them along that path, they are more likely to respond to that faculty member’s requests for assistance.<sup>35</sup> This is where the scholar-practitioner has an asymmetric advantage, but even faculty who have served in shorter-term opportunities like the APSA Congressional Fellowship or the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship can play an important coaching role.<sup>36</sup> This requires dedicated time and space, be that a specific component of appointment-only office hours or an email block to respond to queries.

The *sine qua non* of coaching, and an important expectation for students, is the letter of recommendation. A best practice for career development letters of recommendation is to have a partial form letter. The component that is consistent is the description you provide of the second-level course that you taught and the expectations thereof. That allows you to consistently describe what you expected to recipients in the policy space, and to put the student in question’s performance into context. That said, a full form letter is clear to any recipient, and using form letters for students who may be leveraging your own network can undermine your own credibility as a recommender. In this context, I would require any student who asked for a letter of recommendation to come see me for a coaching session in office hours in advance of the letter’s submission. This would allow for a conversation to understand why the specific professional opportunity fits into the “arc of the student’s story,” so that as an author, I could provide specific context to the recipient.

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<sup>35</sup> On the broader phenomenon of faculty advising, see Neilan S. Chaturvedi and Mario A. Guerrero, “Career Preparation and Faculty Advising: How Faculty Advising Can Improve Student Outcomes and Prepare Them for Life After Graduation,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 19, no. 1 (2023): 34–47.

<sup>36</sup> On the CFR program, see <https://www.cfr.org/fellowships/international-affairs-fellowship> On APSA, see Bruce Oppenheimer, “Reflections on 65 Years of the APSA Congressional Fellowship Program,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 103–6; Daniel Stid, “Reflections on the APSA Congressional Fellowship from the Vantage Point of a Non-Academic Career,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018): 137–39.

I would require that letters of recommendation remain anonymous to the students requesting. This allows for an honest discussion of the student's strengths and opportunities for growth. But particularly if a student is plugging into a faculty member's network, the letter of recommendation is necessary but not sufficient. A follow-up email or phone call between the faculty and the prospective employer can pay significant dividends.

#### *Step 6: Get Feedback*

Feedback comes from two sources from the pilot class. The first is from the students themselves who have taken the class and then gone into professional or pre-professional opportunities in the field in question. These are the most valuable students to bring back as alumni supporters. Soliciting their feedback on what worked and did not work in class—and then making syllabus changes in response, as appropriate—gives those students a stake in the community the faculty member is building. The second source of feedback is from any employers to whom you sent students. To the extent that the feedback from employers mirrors student feedback, it is ideal to either double down on what worked or pivot from what did not. When there are differences between employers and students, laundering that feedback and testing it with the first alumni cohort is important to validate—or invalidate—the responses. Here it is also important to “land” a reasonable N of students with employers so that the tyranny of small numbers does not bias the faculty member's sample.

#### *Step 7: Identify and Implement Alumni Engagement Channels*

In advance of the second running of the second-level class, it is critical to build in specific, defined ways in which alumni can support the class. From referrals of new students to coaching and small group mentoring, the syllabus design from the outset should have “hooks” where alumni can plug in. Educational technology choices matter here too. Another best practice is to create a standing invitation for alumni to sit in on class. This provides an opportunity for them to “refresh” their skills and knowledge and shows the commitment of the class to building links across time.

#### *Step 8: Scale*

The first two cohorts of students are the most important in building an alumni network. From there, it becomes easier to build a center of gravity, ideally an alumni network larger than the enrollment in the class itself, to find additional opportunities. Alumni should be encouraged to identify internship and early career opportunities for current students and early access to those opportunities. Soon, when done correctly, a faculty member can build a “flywheel.”<sup>37</sup>

A final point – to work over time, this requires a faculty member or faculty team to stay on at least the second-level course, if not the second-level and the survey course, for years at a time. This falls apart when a faculty member moves on after a year or two. Only faculty consistency

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<sup>37</sup> Jim C. Collins, *Turning the Flywheel: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2019).

can keep a cohort model going over time. In an era of contingent faculty, this requires a Department-level commitment to keep the right people in place for the right amount of time.<sup>38</sup>

### **What's the Point?**

We want students to choose the study of politics.<sup>39</sup> If we didn't, why would we have bothered to have learned it and taught it ourselves? But we owe it to our students to create the best possible career opportunities for them. Indeed, for those of us who place a moral or ethical stake on what we teach, we have an obligation to place thoughtful students in places where they can have a political and/or policy impact. What we teach and how we teach it matter enormously.<sup>40</sup> But so does how we help those students take advantage of what they have learned to make the world a better place. Cohort and career development strategies leverage weak ties and structural holes to let our students help themselves and each other over time. It places us as faculty in positions to shape their futures. And to have a greater impact as well.

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<sup>38</sup> Eric Fure-Slocum and Claire Goldstene, eds., *Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Bunte, "Why Do Students Enroll in Political Science Courses?"

<sup>40</sup> As with everything, there is a political aspect to this. See Jason Giersch, "Professors' Politics and Their Appeal as Instructors," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 53, no. 2 (April 2020): 281–85.

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