Strong Foundations: A Holistic Approach to Political Science Career Preparation

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Abstract

This paper outlines a comprehensive scaffolding approach implemented within our political science program to equip undergraduate students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for successful careers. By fostering critical thinking, writing, public speaking, and civic engagement, we aim to cultivate well-rounded graduates who can thrive in diverse professional settings.

Our scaffolding strategy involves a carefully curated sequence of courses and co-curricular activities designed to progressively enhance students' abilities. A particular emphasis is placed on formative experiences such as Model UN or the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature which build towards targeted internship opportunities, such as placements with the Tennessee State Legislature and local governments. These experiences provide students with firsthand exposure to various career paths within the political science field and allows them to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges. Pairing experiences with polish, the final step is the senior seminar with its emphasis on post-graduation preparation and reflection.

We will discuss the specific components of our scaffolding approach, the impact it has had on student outcomes, and the lessons learned from our implementation. By sharing our experiences, we hope to inspire other political science programs to adopt similar strategies and contribute to the broader goal of preparing graduates for successful careers in the public, political, private, education, and non-profit sectors.

As professors at a rural regional comprehensive university in the South, we are constantly inundated with inquiries and questions about the usefulness of a degree in political science. We are not the only ones though – faculties of history, philosophy, sociology as well most of the humanities – are often asked the same question; how is this going to make me money or help me get a job?

This is the question we have been consistently trying to address, and in our attempts to faithfully tackle it while staying true to our academic ideals, we set upon developing a skill oriented scaffolding approach for our undergraduate degree program in political science. Our goal was to create a program that embeds several high impacts practices, focuses on specific skills at regular intervals throughout the four years, and has milestones that can be easily pointed out to at the time of recruitment and for career planning. In essence, what we wanted to do was to create the infrastructure whereby if we were asking the question – what good is this degree and will it get me a job? We could clearly say; yes, it will because here is a list of skills you will learn, and this is how you will be employing them. We want to point out that this trend is something higher education is going through i.e., the constant questioning of its purpose. In a world driven by social media trends and self-styled gurus who preach the gospel of get rich quick schemes, the onus to justify the logic of college and its value proposition has fallen on the shoulders of not just the university admins but also the faculty.

This paper outlines how we approached a program level revamp driven by the need to address the above mentioned questions and implemented the changes. We argue that it is important for our discipline to not fight external pressures but to take them head on and

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adapt our programs to it. Political science as a discipline has to offer a value proposition for students beyond simply extoling the virtues of the intellectual stimulation. In the next section, we explain the concept of scaffolding, specifically what it looks like for an undergraduate political science program. We offer examples of two of the most noteworthy skill development interventions that we implement as part of the scaffolding program and their impact in terms of career trajectories of our majors and recent graduates. We conclude this paper with the lessons we have learned so far from this program level undertaking.

What is Scaffolding? Why it matters?

Scaffolding is a widely used methodology in early childhood learning, psychology, and education. At its core, the scaffolding approach as envisioned by Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976) is about the level of support for students, more initially with the support diminishing as students learn more skills. The process is to start with substantial adult supervision for children but as they keep gaining skills and confidence, the supervision slowly phases out. Evidence from work done using this approach to teach math to school children has shown promising results (van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005). Anghileri (2006) also expands on this notion to consider the possibilities of how such an approach would work from the perspective of the learner and not just that of the instructor. The core argument in these studies as well as others (de Jong, Korthagen & Wubbels, 1998; Simons & Klien, 2007; van de Pol & Beishuizen, 2010; van der Valk & de Jog, 2009; Verenikina, 2008) is scaffolding helps but it comes down to how it is prepared and at what levels in terms of grades and learning years. In that sense, it is not a silver bullet to help every teacher, it is

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merely an approach that can be adapted as needed. At the university level however, this is a new idea given the complications of implementation at that scale.

Our Skill Oriented Scaffolding Approach for Career Prep

The crux of our approach is that we cannot merely expect changes through pedagogical innovation at the course level to be sufficient, we must revamp a whole program with relevant courses focusing of development of skill sets at different stages. This must be conscious effort where program design must precede instructional design. With program updates in place, we move into offering a wide variety of assignments that allow specialization in specific skills throughout the four years of college. This is coupled with mentorship and advisement in terms of course selection and career planning. The first two years of courses are the skill development stage, the third year is about honing skills coupled with career advisement and the final year is mostly advisement and mentorship driven. The last two years are also where we introduce our students to immersion programs and experiential learning through Model UN, internships, travel study, and mock state legislature exercises.
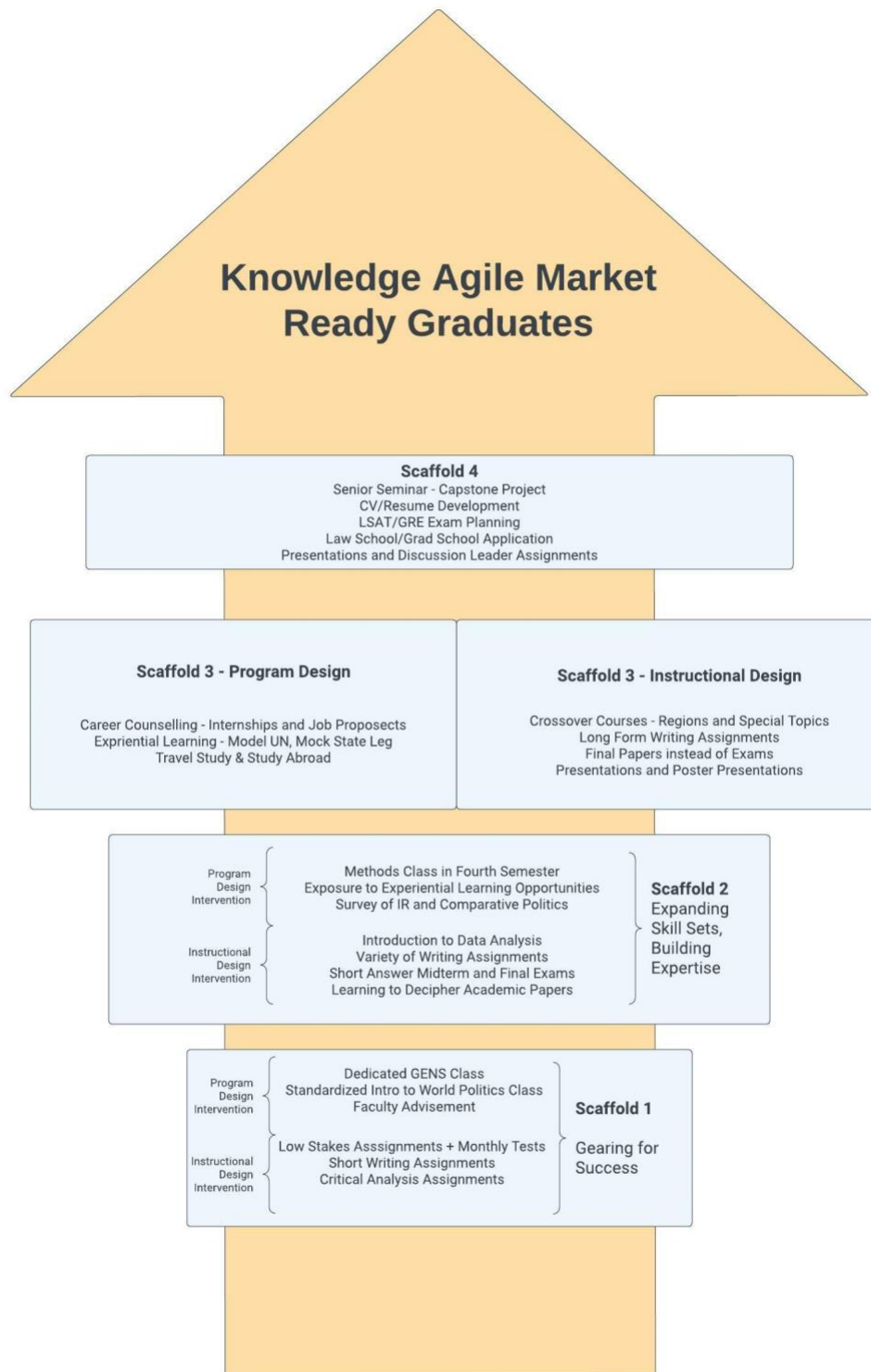
While a scaffolding approach is used regularly at the school level, especially within special education or STEM teaching, it has been sparingly used at the university or college level. We adapted the scaffolding approach and tweaked it to fit the requirements of the university level teaching and learning. What we learned from our experience is that to implement this skill oriented scaffolding approach, the program design is key. Simply having instructional design innovation at the course level does not fully achieve the intention behind the scaffolding approach. But, let's face it, program restructuring, and

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catalog change are a painfully slow process with most changes at least a year out to be official. While we were waiting, we did proceed with some of the instructional design changes, especially in our lower-division class and some experimentation in upper-division classes. And it may seem like the process was linear from program changes to instructional changes, however, it was more program changes submitted, instructional changes implemented while we waited, program changes became official and then continue to implement instructional changes.

In building our scaffolding program foundation, we started with the updating of our degree requirements and retooling a dormant concentration within our undergraduate political science program. Our intention was to build it entirely using the scaffolding model with core courses throughout the four years addressing specific skill needs. To this end, we embedded High Impact Practices (HIPs) at various stages throughout the four years. For instance, while in the first year we focus on First Year Experiences through our freshman only class, GENS 101, and through collaborative assignments. By the time the students get to the fourth year they are working their way through a senior seminar class that is laser focused on writing CVs, having mock interviews, and planning out their job search. Each year of the undergraduate degree offers a value proposition to our students, and that directly impacts our recruitment and retention rates. Figure 1 illustrates our skill oriented scaffolding approach with examples of what interventions happen at what stage.

In the next section, we offer insights about two of these interventions – experiential learning and the senior seminar. Both have been game changers for our students in terms of being job market ready.

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Figure 1 – Skill Oriented Scaffolding

Knowledge Agile Market Ready Graduates

Scaffold 4
Senior Seminar - Capstone Project
CV/Resume Development
LSAT/GRE Exam Planning
Law School/Grad School Application
Presentations and Discussion Leader Assignments

Scaffold 3 - Program Design

Career Counselling - Internships and Job Proposects
Expriential Learning - Model UN, Mock State Leg
Travel Study & Study Abroad

Scaffold 3 - Instructional Design

Crossover Courses - Regions and Special Topics
Long Form Writing Assignments
Final Papers instead of Exams
Presentations and Poster Presentations

Program Design Intervention
Methods Class in Fourth Semester
Exposure to Experiential Learning Opportunities
Survey of IR and Comparative Politics

Instructional Design Intervention
Introduction to Data Analysis
Variety of Writing Assignments
Short Answer Midterm and Final Exams
Learning to Decipher Academic Papers

Scaffold 2
Expanding Skill Sets, Building Expertise

Program Design Intervention
Dedicated GENS Class
Standardized Intro to World Politics Class
Faculty Advisement

Instructional Design Intervention
Low Stakes Asssignments + Monthly Tests
Short Writing Assignments
Critical Analysis Assignments

Scaffold 1
Gearing for Success

Focus on Experiential Learning

The experiences that build knowledge and skills that allow our students to be successful occur both in and out of the classroom. Not only is experiential learning a component of our program's scaffolding, but we also approach experiential learning from a scaffolding approach. More specifically, to begin with, we encourage freshmen and sophomores to participate in activities like Model United Nations (MUN) and Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature (TISL). These usually can accommodate a larger number of students and students are usually working as a team to prepare for the events, which, in having that support system, can alleviate some of the fear of the unknown when students first participate. Both activities involve writing, public speaking, lobbying, and offer networking opportunities. Moreover, both require travel (Nashville or Atlanta) and business attire. While these may not seem like milestones, MUN is the first time many of our students have been on a plane or to a major city outside of Tennessee, and many don't own a suit or professional attire, so connecting them to campus resources offered through the Career Planning and Development Office are essential to prepare them for not only this activity but other future opportunities. Additionally, both MUN and TISL provide ways for students who have completed our required intro classes (220: American Political Institutions and Policy and 230: Intro to World Politics) to experience and apply their knowledge outside the classroom.

The second stage of experiential learning we advise for our students focuses on travel study and study abroad opportunities. We tend to target these more among sophomores and juniors. Political science offers its own discipline-specific international

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travel study every other year, but students can join domestic or international trips offered across campus. While costs are continually an issue, there are scholarships available to help students defray the cost. The benefit of these trips are they can gain travel experience – navigating airports, public transportation, foreign cities, different languages, new currencies, etc. – and acquire stories. Something we constantly discuss with our students is that they need experiences to make them interesting and stand out during interviews and memorable when networking. For example, a student who graduates in four years with no experiential learning is more forgettable than a similar student who went to Sweden, saw the Northern Lights, went on a sleeper train, and got stuck in an elevator (all true stories). That student can demonstrate resilience and a willingness to try new things through their travel study stories.

The final piece of our scaffolded experiential learning approach focuses on internships and conference presentations. These are promoted most among juniors and seniors. All students can benefit from internships, but especially for those looking at graduate or law school, we also suggest applying to present at a conference with undergraduate sections like ISA or MPSA. In terms of internships, the Tennessee Legislative Internship Program (TLIP) has been a popular option among our majors with 1-5 selected for each spring legislative session. Within the last 2 years, since the announcement of the Ford's Blue Oval City project on our side of Tennessee, we've also been maneuvering to be a resource for city and county governments on rural development issues. From community focus groups to city recorder trainings to oral history projects and community needs assessment surveys, we, with the support of a grant, are able to offer a

variety of paid internships to our majors. The paid part is particularly important as many of our students need to work and have a source of income and are not financially able to purse unpaid internship opportunities. Moreover, with the creation of our required senior seminar course that is offered every fall, to be described in more depth shortly, we now have students completing a research project, including a poster, and able to apply for conferences every fall. The senior seminar has only been offered since fall 2023, but we did have 2 students participate in poster sessions at MPSA last year. Not only did they get to sit in on panels and network with others working on similar topics, but they could see the level of research expected of the graduate students, which honestly for our students was quite eye opening and they wished they'd paid more attention in the research methods class.

In sum, experiential learning is a key part of our scaffolding approach. It is not a required part of the program, but we heavily promote it. Ideally, we'd like students to participate in all three levels outlined – to participate, for example, in Model UN, go on a travel study, and complete an internship. Reminding students about opportunities and encouraging them to take advantage of experiential learning happens both in courses where we'll make announcements, but also during advising.

Focus on Senior Seminar

Moving back into the classroom, a course we created as we implemented the necessary curricular changes for our scaffolding approach was the senior seminar. We wanted, and our students needed, a final chance to polish their skills – writing, speaking, teamwork – and the space to explore and prepare for what comes after graduation. There

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are three primary things we focus on in this class: post-graduation exploration and preparation, a research project, and reflection.

First, students research post-graduation options whether they are interested in continuing their studies through law or graduate school or finding a job. We then work through several rounds of CV, resume, and cover letter drafts tailored to the post-graduation option of their choosing. Another critical piece is to hold mock-interviews, an area our students have been weak in.

In terms of the research project, we present this as the culmination of their undergraduate research experience and encourage them to pick something that would be a good writing sample for graduate school applications, something related to the field they want to work in, or something they are passionate about. The students write a traditional paper but then they also turn it into a research poster. Working in conjunction with our campus library, the students organize an in-person and online research poster event. For the in-person portion, student stand by their posters and answer questions, like a conference poster session. This is a useful way to demystify the conference experience. Students realize it isn't as scary or stressful to have people mill around and ask them for a summary of their research or a question. In fact, many enjoy getting to share what they've learned. This in-person event is open to campus and community. We encourage our freshmen to attend so they can see what they will be expected to do and the progress they'll make from year 1 to year 4. In addition, we also host the posters online through a Word Press site and students must moderate and respond to comments over the course of the week. For both events, students are in charge. This is where the teamwork comes as

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the class is divided into the in-person and online groups. Each is responsible to plan, promote and execute their side of the event. From picking a date, to liaising with the library and campus printing, to designing flyers, promoting the event, hauling supplies, learning Word Press, etc. Overall, it is more than just a research project. It is conference preparation, event planning, website design, and teamwork; all skills that will be valuable after graduation.

The final piece of the senior seminar focuses on reflection, which occurs throughout the course. For example, students prepare a presentation that reflects on their experiential learning while in college (what they did, what they learned, what advice they'd give to their freshmen selves). These presentations are recorded, and they also must reflect on their public speaking skills. After the research poster event, students reflect on their own contributions and how the group dynamic worked (or didn't). Finally, as part of their portfolio, alongside the final drafts of their CVs, resumes, and cover letters, they complete one final reflection about the most influential or memorable aspects of their time at our university and as one of our majors. All the various reflections are important for students to see both how far they've come, to remember all they've accomplished, and to note where improvement is still needed.

Overall, the senior seminar has been crucial to providing our students final polish and preparation they need to be successful after graduation. While it has only been offered twice so far, we've already had students sharing with us that it has been useful in helping them be ready for interviews, that it gave them ideas of what to do after graduation that they hadn't considered previously, and gave them the confidence to apply for MPSA. While

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anecdotal, this is evidence that our program and curricular changes are positively impacting students.

Careers Students are Pursuing

So, has all of this amounted to anything in terms of career choices? We believe so. As the program has evolved, we have made it a point to guide our students towards paths less travelled. While the bulk of our students continue to pursue law school and grad school, a significant number are now opting to go into local government and regional development work. Additionally, students are also opting to go into K12 and higher education administration.

We have observed this change ever since we implemented the career planning scaffold starting in the sophomore year. Unlike most programs, all students at our university have a faculty advisor. The advisor not only advises them on course choices every semester, but also about their career trajectory. The career "game plan" allows the student to understand exactly what is expected of them to pursue the career they would like. But the biggest challenge we face is that a pretty significant number of our students have no idea what they really want to do. And this is where the scaffolding has been useful in the recent years. Because we can introduce them to a multitude of career choices, they are able to see the kind of options they would have never considered.

For instance, a recent grant funded project enabled for recruitment of student interns to work with municipal governments. The project overseen by one of the faculty led to at least three students eventually focusing their career goals towards becoming city recorders and planners. While the university has no program on urban design, city

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management or city planning, just by the virtue of working on these issues as part of an embedded internship with various small towns in our region, our students understood what it takes to do these jobs, how much they can get paid, and whether this is something they can see themselves do in the long run.

Another change we have made, as part of our mentorship and advising as part of the scaffolding process is to be more open about conversations related to careers and money. So, instead of simply asking questions like what you want to do with your degree or what career are you interested in, we often start with questions about what kind of life you want to live and how much money are you expecting to make. What we realized very quickly by doing so was that fundamentally, courtesy of social media, our student body's expectations of money they would make after college were irrational and detached from reality. For instance, the answer get most often is I intend to make six figures straight out college. To rationalize this, we have started to talk more about the average household income in the US, and what market salaries look like. For example, one of the authors has his class search through indeed.com on the very first day of class for jobs they believe they would be a fit for. It takes about thirty minutes, but by the end, the class often realizes they are no more than may be four jobs that fit them and for those four, they are competing against each other and everyone else. This rationalization approach has been a game changer for our students. Because they are better equipped, and understand the market more clearly, they have enough time to plan things out in more thorough details. Senior seminar really helps our students bring it all home and conceptualize the career they want to be aiming for and a path for how to get there.

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Our Learning ... thus far

In reflecting on our shift to a scaffolding approach, there are several things we've learned and things we continue to work on. First, we've learned it is important to tailor opportunities to students and slot them in where they fit. We have tried to put out calls to all majors about internship opportunities with little to no responses. What has worked better is to target specific students through advising and certain classes and say, "I think you'd be great at this" or "Have you considered this opportunity?" While we shouldn't have to sell them (individually or as a major) on these opportunities, we still currently must. For example, we have internship openings we can't fill or room for more students on travel study trips. We are hoping that as more students complete the program with the scaffolding changes that we'll start to see a more profound cultural shift – more students doing experiential learning, higher visibility among freshmen of what seniors accomplish and what expectations are, and ingraining the value of these experiences.

Additionally, as a regional comprehensive university, we've learned our students are going to stay way closer to home than we expect. During college, students may go on a two-week travel study but can't imagine being gone a whole semester abroad. After college, even if there are limited employment opportunities, they plan/want to stay in the area or return to their small hometowns. This is part of the reason we've gotten more active in rural development and local government, as there are demands and opportunities in these area for people with the right skills. We've also tried to be more purposeful in making connections between global and local issues in our classes and experiential learning since

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most likely, most of our students won't be living and working in the LAs or DCs but in smalltown America. So instead of fixating on getting our students placed in DC, we are utilizing most of our resources on a 100 mile radius around the university. This has had unintended consequences for us as a department as well. Not only are our students getting internship placements and jobs, but we are also being sought out by local governments, corporations, development districts and nonprofits to partner on projects. Since we began this process, our department has won three significant grants, one of which was funded by the Ford Foundation, signed MoUs with nearly half the county governments in West Tennessee, and are involved in at least two Department of Agriculture grant proposals as partners to city governments.

Finally, in terms of what we've learned, we've noted our students need even more practice and polish when it comes to things like interviews. The week of mock interview practice in the senior seminar is great but isn't helpful for students who are interviewing for an internship as a junior, or who are in the catalog prior to the scaffolding changes and weren't required to take the senior seminar. To address these weaknesses, we are hoping to work on this some in the freshmen studies class and then also develop a brown bag lunch series where we can more informally discuss opportunities and weaknesses. Moreover, since the pandemic, one of the biggest changes we have seen in our students is they have little to no skills to engage with others. This means we have to also start focusing on personality development and ability of our students to clearly communicate not just with an audience but with people in general.

In shifting to what we are working on, we have within the last year launched a newsletter, published twice a year. We are using this both to recruit but also highlight accomplishments of current students and alums. Similarly, we created an alumni LinkedIn account to track where our graduates end up and the types of positions they acquire. Finally, we recently became our own department (Political Science and Global Studies) and we plan to establish an advisory board where alums can give us insight into what skills different industries and employers are looking for so we can continue to ensure we are preparing our students accordingly to be successful upon graduation.

In sum, we see significant potential and promising early results from adopting a scaffolding approach to our political science program and will continue to track its impact and adjust as needed to best prepare our graduates for the job market.

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