

Adapting the Political Science Major to an Evolving Higher Education Environment

Dr. Christopher Housenick

Dr. Michael T. Rogers

Arkansas Tech University

If there was a golden age of higher education in the United States, it was probably the mid to late twentieth century. Growing enrollments, expanding resources, government subsidized higher education through low-cost loan programs, all of which led to the expansion of higher education institutions and programs. If that was the golden age, it is definitely over. Two decades into the twenty-first century and post-Covid 19 pandemic, higher education has entered the Great Contraction (Gardner 2021, 3). Many higher education institutions are experiencing severe declines in enrollments (Arkansas Tech University (ATU) has gone from about 12,000 pre-Covid-19 to 8,000), grant resources and funding are drying up and becoming more competitive than ever, nonviable majors and programs are being eliminated as retrenchment policies and plans are put into effect, tenure is under attack, non-collegiate options have become popular due to the high costs of higher education, and this has culminated in the merger, closure and decline in the number of numerous higher education institutions across the United States over the last few years (WCET 2023; Birrell 2020; Brennan 2023; Carey 2022; Mallach 2024; Hanson 2024; Weissmann 2013; Gehrz 2013; Lederman 2019). In the face of these realities, it is imperative to echo Feeley and Van Rechten's claim that the path forward for political science programs may require rethinking and changing some of the ways the discipline has operated over the past hundred years (August 30, 2019, 366). Reflecting on the developments in higher education generally and in the state of Arkansas, as well as the political science degree at Arkansas Tech University, below is humbly offered some observations on what political science programs and activities may want to double down on and continue, while likewise providing some observations on what adaptations these programs can consider as ways suited to the evolving terrain of higher education. Political science programs will likely need to make some changes to survive the Great Contraction and thrive in the twenty-first century.

To encourage political science departments and programs to rethink their degrees and activities, below the evolving student body and its new expectations of college are discussed. Next, there is an examination of the HIPs (high impact practices)—particularly the experiential learning activities of undergraduate research (UR), simulations, and internships—common in many political science programs that are worth doubling down on, expanding, or adding for programs not offering such opportunities. Their benefits, advice on how to incorporate these HIPs practices, and evaluation of how they serve the traditional collegiate student body of the twentieth century versus today’s evolving one are provided. This is followed by a discussion of some possible adaptations of programs, as well as new responsibilities and activities political science departments and programs will likely need to play more active roles in are presented. The backdrop for all these observations are examples of how each have benefited the ATU political science program, keeping its enrollments stable over the past decade of upheaval in higher education (and at ATU). It is by no means our intention to suggest that the ATU political science program should be generalized to all political science departments and programs, but simply to offer our case as food for thought, as it fueled the observations provided throughout.

The State of the Political Science Major Amidst Higher Education Trends

With the onset of the Great Contraction, how fares the political science major today? Only a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century many political scientists are concerned that the major has declined. Approaching the 2020s, APSA projected through a flattening or slight decline in political science degrees conferred through 2030. Likewise, APSA foresaw no boom in degree enrollments but expected to be relatively stable or, at worst, experience some decline. The stable force in enrollments were to be females, who were projected to surpass their male counterparts and be stable over the next couple decades. Male political science majors were

projected to decline (APSA). Of course, such projection could not have foreseen the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing Great Contraction. Thus, a few years after these projections—not even halfway through the 2020s—Ishiyama publishes “Whither Political Science in a Post-Pandemic World.” In it, he presents data on the decline in degrees conferred, which has not been slight; it has been stark, down to about 34,000 per year by the start of the 2020s when the 2010s opened with around 40,000 per year. On the more positive side, political science enrollments generally seem to be flat or to even be recovering, while other liberal arts disciplines (like history) are seeing declines (2023, 421).

Yet, the value of Ishiyama’s “Whither Political Science” analysis is more than the enrollments and degrees conferred data. As important is the picture he paints of the twenty-first century higher education terrain (see also Ishiyama, Deardorff, and Lake 2024). First, he notes the change in where students are going—to large state universities or two-year options in community and junior colleges), as opposed to other options like the high price tag liberal arts colleges (2023, 421). Twenty-first century students (and parents) are being more conscientious about how they invest their dollars in higher education. Then, Ishiyama warns, while “Many curricular models were based on designing a political science major for a large cohort of majority White middle-class young people in a full-time residential setting,” today’s student body sees 1) women outnumbering men (APSA’s second projection has been spot on), 2) increasing minority (particularly African American and Hispanic) populations of students, 3) more nontraditional (i.e., older and not right out of high school) students and 4) more first generation students (2023, 421; see also Hurst 2024; Ishiyama, Deardorff, and Lake 2024). Consider St. Amour’s description:

The numbers are clear: 37 percent of today’s students are older than 25, according to information collected by Higher Learning Advocates. Almost two-thirds, 64 percent, work while in college. Another quarter or so are parenting. About half, 49 percent, are financially

independent. Almost one in three, 31 percent, live at or below the federal poverty level (2020).¹

The changing demographics of the evolving twenty-first century higher education student body can be obstacles, but also represent opportunities for political science departments and programs.

Given the changes in characteristics of the twenty-first century student body, it should not be surprising that the current student bodies' needs and expectations of college are not the same as that of the predominantly white middle to high socioeconomic status students that filled twentieth century higher education institutions. As Ishiyama explains, "These new students are asking us what our major can do for them in terms of career aspirations"(2023, 422). He adds such career readiness demands are echoed by stakeholders (politicians, parents, etc.) in society, adding a litany of the types of skills desired— "critical thinking, communication skills, global/intercultural fluency, digital technology and information literacy, professionalism/work ethic, and leadership and teamwork" (2023, 421–422).

Think about the profound shift this represents between the twentieth and twenty-first century students, the former tended to reside on campus, were not typically working and had time to participate in and experience all the institution has to offer, often while never needing to leave campus. The latter spend less time on campus (virtual ones may never step foot on campus), seek career skills ASAP to improve their lives and opportunities, and—not being on campus as much—struggle to access all the services and experiences the institution offers. Instead, they seek off campus or virtual experiences that give them a taste of college life, but more importantly

¹ Much of the evolving twenty-first century characteristics of students applies to ATU, as it is a regional university, has a high proportion of first generation and many low socioeconomic status students, as well as a sizeable nontraditional and commuter student population. The glaring exception is ATU is not diverse as over 90% of the student population are Arkansans and most are white. African American is minimal and flat (only 5% of the student body in Fall 2024). The Hispanic population of students is minimal but growing, making up 12% of the student body in Fall 2024 (Arkansas Tech University Institutional Research Office).

instill in them new employable skills and give them opportunities to practice the careers they are pursuing. Today's student seems less inclined to jump from classroom studies to learning on the job, but demand more of a bridge between the two to test out the career and ensure them it is what that want to do and that they can do it. Departments and programs that do not consider how the student body has changed and the challenges today's students face or their evolving expectations of what the college experience should be do so at their own peril and may find the twenty-first century higher education terrain difficult to navigate and unkind to their survival.

As a backdrop for the discussion below, comments are based on experiences from and reflection on the ATU political science program, a program that we restructured into career paths from the more common approach to coverage of the major subfields of the discipline. (Rogers 2021, 387–393; Feeley and Van Vechten August 30, 2019, 1–29). For background, as mentioned earlier ATU is a regional state university. It has experienced post Covid-19 a severe decline in enrollment in the last decade, losing about 4,000 students or a quarter of its student body since 2015 and the termination of a handful of academic programs (Arkansas Tech University Institutional Research Office). It has a high proportion of first-generation students, typically of a low to middle class socioeconomic status. And, many of our students work, some full-time, while trying to juggle college. Attending college really benefits our students, as ATU ranks in the top 100 (64th) for increasing the social mobility of its graduates (Strassner 2023). In the midst of the last half decade of upheaval in higher education and declining enrollments at ATU, the ATU political science major has managed to grow and the stabilize its major enrollment around fifty to fifty-five students for any given year (Rogers 2021, 387–393). We argue a number of factors contribute to the ATU political science program stability in the face of these changes, covered below they

are: HIPs experiential learning practices, modality flexibility in course and content delivery, and taking increased responsibility for and emphasis on marketing the program by the department.

Doubling Down on What Political Science Programs Often Do Well Already

What have political science programs long done that should be continued, even doubled down on in today's higher education environment? A key aspect of many political science programs is providing career and life skill trainings through high impact practices or HIPs. In fact, amongst the prescriptive recommendations by the 1991 Walhke Report for structuring a political science program was that "all students" be offered "several kinds of 'real-life' political situations "through internships, study in Washington, D.C. or state capitols, political participation like on campaigns or participating in media coverage, etc." (1991, 55). McClellan et al. find many programs do integrate such activities, arguing "Compared to other disciplines political science is an avid sponsor of HIPs," citing the extensive opportunities for undergraduate research (UR) (offered by approximately a quarter of political science programs) and internships for credit (offered by three-quarters of political science programs) (2021, 675). In addition to these two active learning opportunities, many political science programs offer extra-curricular experiential HIPs, like Model UN, Arab League, and Mock Trial. It is these variety of HIPs activities we recommend political science programs double down on for the twenty-first century. If political science programs already offer one or more of these, they may want to consider expanding those offerings; for those departments or programs not currently providing such opportunities, we offer below some scholarly resources on the benefits of the activities, as well as guides on how one might start them. While there are some significant costs for faculty in time, resources, and energy which come in addition to their required teaching and scholarship expectations, as demonstrated by the literature and reflections offered below, the benefits to the

students as well as for the reputation of the program, and—yes—for the faculty involved often far outweigh these costs. After covering each HIPs practice, an evaluation of how the active serves the traditional (twentieth century) versus the evolving (twenty-first century) student body of today is provided.

Before discussing the HIPs practices, it is worth mentioning some classroom activities that have long been used to expose students to politics and help them evaluate possible career pathways. At ATU, courses connected to local political institutions (e.g. State and Local Government or Political Parties) have proven fruitful for enhancing the political science program. Prior and post pandemic, in such courses outside practitioners into the classroom. For instance, for State and Local Government one week the city mayor would attend, another a city council member, then a state legislator, etc. Also, state and local party leaders would come to talk to the students, explaining what they do and how they rose to their position. Additionally, people from various non-profit organizations and interest groups have been brought in to meet with the students and share their experiences and insights. These interactions exposed our students to political science at a more personal level, thereby demonstrating that not all political science takes place in Washington, D.C. It also bridges the classroom to practice divide. Something as simple as having students attend a local government meeting can open the door to students being more politically involved. Then, all these activities can potentially be done virtually through a Zoom meeting, but the face-to-face is most desirable. These types of courses were so successful, a couple members of one student cohort in these courses went on to apply, attend, and earn master's degrees in public policy and public administration.

Undergraduate Research (UR)

The first of these HIPS—undergraduate research or UR—particularly plays well in the contemporary environment as it seizes on the “science” aspect of political science at a time when STEM is the privileged educational emphasis in America (Axelrod 2017). While political science education does not typically involve labs as a routine part of the classroom curriculum like our natural science colleagues, some political science programs and faculty build UR into their programs (Ishiyama 2021, 371–384). However, the use of UR in political science programs is overshadowed by other disciplines, like STEM and psychology (Bijsmans 2023, 116; Rogers 2023, 140). This is an area for political science programs to consider expanding, if not doubling down on what they already do. However, the advocacy here of UR is by no means an endorsement of a positivist or behaviorist political science as the end all, be all of political science. The point is a practical one, for the discipline given the higher education market bias for STEM, to market itself differently. Marketing the political science major and program as a science like STEM that provides invaluable professional, analytic skills and job training (adaptable to careers in business) through UR that command top dollar in the market can enhance the reputation of political science programs in ways emphasizing being a liberal arts program that trains lawyers (i.e., one of the least popular professions with the public) cannot (Rogers 2021, 387–393).

For political science faculty and programs looking to undertake UR, an invaluable resource—the *Palgrave Handbook of Teaching and Research in Political Science*—has just been published. With it, there is a section—Section IV Conducting Research with Students—that explains the challenges and benefits of researching with students, gives guidance on doing UR, models successful UR practices, as well as explains how one might find funding for such endeavors (Butcher et al. 2023). In the literature, one finds UR is readily recognized as one of the premiere HIPS practices (Kuh 2008). Benefits span numerous educational agents. Foremost, UR

students demonstrate enhanced cognitive and affective abilities over their non-UR peers (Murray 2017 46–57). Summarizing the findings of the UR literature, the benefits range from students showing “better problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and working independently” on the cognitive side, while on the affective they demonstrated “increased confidence and a heightened sense of accomplishment”, as well as demonstrated a greater likelihood to have a “science-identity” (Rogers 2023, 140). Yet, this list does not exhaust the undergraduate benefits. UR students demonstrate superior academic, personal and career development gains over their non-UR peers, as they “have higher graduation rates, and earn more national accolades” and are often coveted by graduate programs (political science ones as well as others), have more defined career plans and get jobs (Rogers 2023, 140). While too often drowned out by faculty skepticism about the costs in time and energy, UR has benefits for faculty, as well. Cited benefits are “research efficiency and output”, as undergraduates can help with data collection and retrieving the relevant literature. Students can likewise bring original perspectives that lead to asking different questions or arriving at new insights and researching with students is “an example of teaching excellence” (Bijsmans 2023, 117; see also Rogers 2023, 141).

At ATU, as Ishiyama and Hartlaub recommend, the program curriculum is scaffolded for promoting research. Ideally, in the sophomore year political science majors complete a research design course where students learn the methods political scientists use and design their own research project using two methods; then, typically in their last year they take Senior Seminar as a capstone course where students execute faculty supervised research projects (often those designed in the sophomore course) (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003, 83–86). This not only lays the foundation for ATU students to have the skills and understanding needed for UR, but helps faculty screen which students are good candidates for doing UR with the faculty. One political

science faculty member has over a decade of experience working with majors to encourage extra-curricular UR, securing them funding that assists him in research for publication that has included their doing literature reviews, assisting in writing IRBs, collecting data, doing focus group and one-on-one interviews, textual analysis, attending and presenting at professional conferences, etc. (Rogers 2023, 137–148). UR has certainly benefited ATU students, as his UR students have routinely found employment post-graduation. One even won acceptance to a competitive UR summer program and went on to prestigious graduate school with full funding. Department faculty doing UR with undergraduates have strong publication records despite having a teaching load of four courses every Fall and Spring (and an optional two more in the summer). When the enhanced faculty publication record of the department members is combined with Department students doing presentations of their research on campus in an annual UR symposium or at the state political science conference, the net result is a positive reputation for the Department and political science program across the university for its academic training and rigor.

As one caveat, UR opportunities have historically gone disproportionately to white males, the staple of the twentieth century student body (Murray 2017 , Chapter 8). This has not been the case at ATU, where women have been the majority of UR students. Still, minorities have yet to be incorporated at ATU, a factor of the small minority population at ATU and in the political science major. The main dilemma is how to create these opportunities with nontraditional students (who tend to be working). Finding funding for UR can help. Yet, in some ways UR caters more towards the twentieth century student body as it helps if the students live on campus and are nonworking, but it need not and should not privilege white males over their just as viable female and minority counterparts.

Simulations

For another HIPs practice, there are the numerous hands-on, career simulation activities political science programs provide through curricular and extra-curricular activities (Model UN, Mock Trial, Arab League, etc.) that are worth doubling down on or expanding today.

A great introduction to the value of simulations and role playing in political science can be found in the *Palgrave Handbook of Teaching and Research in Political Science*, with the section “Leveraging Scholarship to Enhance the Pedagogy of Simulations, Games, and Role Play Exercises”. To see the variety of creative ways political scientists build experiential learning (and UR) into their programs and classrooms, see also the section “Research with Students: Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement” (Butcher et al. 2023). The benefits of such activities are numerous. Political scientists tout such experiential activities like mock trial and moot court as a means to revitalize political science programs and ways to build interdepartmental collaboration with communication and debate colleagues (Vile and Van Dervort 1994, 712–15). Mock Trial simulations are defended for their practical skill development for future lawyers, their promotion of critical thinking, as well as intense student engagement (Stepp and Castle 2019, 136–140). Similarly, students vocalize the benefits in critical thinking and even having fun in moot court, while acknowledging such simulations are hard work (Kammerer 2018, 190–193). Then, studying Model UN Engel et al. find well-structured simulations promote metacognitive growth and development of professional skills for the international relations field (Engel, Pallas, and Lambert 2017, 171–184). While focusing their study on Model UN, Jesuit and Strachan emphasize the value of club membership and the effect peers have on each other that enhances their learning, knowledge and engagement as is well established in other educational literature (2021). Just as important, Shannon finds programs like Model UN and Arab League

promote tolerance and changes in perspectives of the other, particularly Muslims, by students (Shannon 2019, 219–239). Seizing on this point that Model UN is designed to promote tolerance and overcome national ethnocentrism, Coughlin does find some evidence that females may face more barriers to equal participation in the MUN simulations, even if they do not perceive they are disadvantaged (Engel, Pallas, and Lambert 2017, 171–184; Coughlin 2013, 320–335).

There are also numerous articles on how faculty approach starting simulation competition teams. For example, those wanting guidance on running a moot court simulation or competition should see Kammerer, Jr.'s works (2021, 66–76; 2020, 496–507). Similarly, if one wants to start a mock trial program there is Georgian and Thornburg's work "Using the Law to Teach History" (2024) or Ringel's "Designing a Moot Court" (2004, 459–465).

At ATU, simulations have not provided a stimulus for growing the ATU political science program over the last few years. During Covid-19 and the Great Contraction, resources dried up and the Department's experiential program activities like Arab League had to be abandoned. In the decade of running Model UN/Model Arab League team pre-pandemic, it was great for building connections in two places. First, the competitive team created connections within the ATU student body and to the university, creating a greater sense of community and camaraderie that can serve the growing demands for retention departments and programs face today. Second, Model UN/Arab League created student-to-student connections between the competing universities and colleges within the state. However, during the near decade of entering Model UN and Model Arab League conferences, these activities did not clearly yield the tangible benefit of shaping the career paths of student participants. They did not go on to international relations type jobs. This and the challenges of tight budgets—team travel to model conferences was one of the largest expenses that the ATU political science program incurred in a given

academic year—may make such experiential activities more a luxury item for departments and programs. Moreover, if the department or program's goal is towards post-graduation employment, such programs may not be the best investment to obtain that return. However, now that there has been some return to normalcy departments and programs with stable funding sources for Model UN/Arab League may benefit in terms of marketing unique collegiate opportunities provided by the department and program, as well as student loyalty and retention. Past experience is that such programs are particularly popular with international relations students but also can cross over in an interdisciplinary fashion with communication and rhetoric programs with students inclined towards debate. Such activities should be attractive to the growing minority populations heading to college.

For those pursuing experiential activities that prepare for law school, ATU does have a debate club that is run through a separate department (Communications). Additionally, while the political science program does not do mock trial or moot court, we have an active Pre-law Club (and offer a pre-law minor) to serve ATU's prospective law school students.

Reflecting on today's student body and evolving expectations, simulations again may be better suited to the lifestyles of on campus students over those working full-time jobs or raising families. Yet, simulations fit a core desire of today's students, who seem less comfortable they can jump from studying international relations of the law in a classroom to working as an ambassador or in United Nations or being a practicing lawyer. Simulations can be the bridge that allows them to bridge the divide between education in a classroom and developing the hands on practice of a job, helping them 1) test if they can see themselves in that career and 2) gain the skills and confidence needed to actually obtain the types of jobs the simulations model. It may behoove political science departments to ensure simulations serve career-paths better (if that is

the department's primary emphasis). The experience at ATU is the Debate team (like Moot Court and Mock Trial) have been better suited at helping students achieve a law career path than Model UN/Arab League are at leading to United Nations or other international relations jobs.

Internships (and Study Away Programs)

A third type of experiential learning program provided at ATU is internships. Among all these HIPs practices, this may be the most valuable to facilitative student's post-collegiate careers through on-the-job experience and invaluable networking connections. In fact, Leary et al. find internships outperform other applied, service-learning HIPs activities in realizing primary learning objectives (Leary, Sherlock, and Troussas 2020, 1–9). Marineau notes how almost all scholarship on internships in political science sees them as invaluable to the degree (2020, 101–107). For a brief overview of the history of internships in the discipline and their value as service-learning educational practices, there is Frantzich and Mann's "Experiencing Government: Political Science Internships" (Frantzich and Mann 1997, 193–202).

As for the benefits of internships, research has demonstrated students experience both short-term and long-term benefits (for a good overview of the benefits, see Foley and Jordan 2024, 253–273). In the short-term, there are the substantial academic benefits of internships. Internships are known to promote collaboration and teamwork, a skill businesses are increasingly asking colleges and universities to ensure their students have and develop (Coker et al. , 5). Also, the documented benefits of internships range from enhanced cognitive knowledge and writing skills to career readiness (Bradberry and De Maio 2019, 94–111; Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012, 87–92). In fact, the benefit most often noted for internships is career readiness, particularly in shortening the time it takes college students to find their first employment, as they create graduates with job experience (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000, 45–53; Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012, 87–92).

Additionally, there is evidence internships can increase the academic performance of college students (Lowenthal and Sosland 2007, 143–160). On the long-term front, internships allow collegians to explore possible careers (Marineau 2020, 101–107). Not surprisingly, this has meant students that engage in such fieldwork tend to experience job satisfaction more quickly (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000, 45–53; Hathaway, Nagda, and Gregerman, 614). Many political science programs could quickly offer anecdotal stories on how internships are a great way for students to develop the network to secure jobs in the political sphere. Internships often lead to securing positions as legislative staffers or in federal or state agencies, working in an interest group or even in the governor’s office. For evidence of this networking and job placement, Farber finds in the 2010s that college students who had previously interned in the capital of Minnesota went on to make up as much as “a quarter of Senate staffers” and were at one point “80 percent of the legislative assistant positions in the Republican caucus” for the state (Farber 2016, 1).

For political science in particular, there are also important civic benefits. Internships can enhance the interest of students in public service, as well as improve their trust in government (Mariani and Klinkner 2009, 275–293). Similarly, Jenson and Hunt also find internships are able to promote civic education and values, enhance political efficacy, increase trust in government (Jensen and Hunt 2007, 563–569; see also Simons et al. 2012, 325–334). Even in what Anderson dubs “low density” internships (i.e., those not in a capital with a government but in more local and regional governments), “weaker experiences” or benefits do not result. On the contrary, Anderson finds such fieldwork is particularly effective activities for students to “hone their perceptions of what makes good government, good policy, and good politics—not just a good evaluative skill but also a quality of good citizenship (Anderson 2014, 865).” Of course, to increase the likelihood such benefits are realized, the internships typically need to be integrated

into the academic curriculum and program as well as closely overseen by a faculty sponsor/mentor (Foley and Jordan 2024, 253–273; Pecorella 2007, 79–99). Additionally, as internships can be empowering for marginalized demographics, as they continue to make up more of the twenty-first century undergraduate student body (Ishiyama, Deardorff, and Lake 2024; Doherty 2011, 34–47). Such fieldwork experiences can even lead to partnerships that enhance university-community relations (Simons et al. 2012, 325–334).

APSA provides some invaluable resource for programs looking to create or enhance their internship programs for student. Most notably, there is an entire edited volume—*Political Science Internships: Towards Best Practices*—published by APSA that offers advice and examples on running internships in a variety of settings and contexts (Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg 2021). For programs looking to start their own in-house internship program in their state capitals, an invaluable “roadmap” is provided by Jordan and Matzke (2024, 1–21; see also, Kelly 2005a, 196–210; Hindmoor 2010, 483). Noting how internships fit the desire that education enhance student’s marketability as desired in today’s higher education environment, Lucas is a great resource for thinking about and aligning a department’s internship program with its learning outcomes (2024, 90–100). Also, the work by Kelly is valuable, as it provides a pre-briefing for how to prepare students for their internships (2005b, 49–52). For those wanting to explore combining HIPs practices, Moon and Shokman offer a model that folds UR into the internship through undergraduates conducting research for a political organization (2000, 169–176).

At ATU, the internship opportunities have traditionally been ad hoc. As a regional university with a sparse student service infrastructure, there is no central office or department for setting up and overseeing internships. Internships have been one of the ATU political science programs best pathways for students to gain job experience and land jobs post graduate. ATU

political science majors have secured interns with political figures throughout Arkansas, including the lieutenant governor's office, state attorney general's office, and with Arkansas's federal house and senate members (in local offices and in Washington, D.C.). Several of these internships turned to employment after graduation either for the politicians or through networking that led to political party or interest group employment.

While the above internships were set up ad hoc, the real boon for ATU students over the last few years has been with The Washington Center. Frantzich and Mann explain TWC was formed in 1975 to facilitate internship opportunities for college students in the federal capital (1997, 196). Today, TWC partners with over 500 colleges and universities across the US. (The Washington Center a) to provide a variety of internships ranging from full semester spring, fall or summer ones to week long seminars (like the Inside Washington Seminar in January or the National Security Seminar in May). More importantly, eleven states and two U.S. territories provide state funding to support their residents participating in TWC internships (The Washington Center b).² Arkansas is one of those states, the only caveat is that funding requires the recipient be an Arkansas resident. Learning of this opportunity in the early 2010s, ATU entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with The Washington Center (TWC) and a Department member became the ATU liaison to the Center. there was no formal internship program for ATU students. Since signing the MOU with TWC, ATU has been able over the last several years to send around nine to ten students a year to a week-long seminar, with students only needing to supply travel and food expenses, as the seminar fee and housing in D.C. has been covered. It is some additional work for the liaison to coordinate with TWC and recruit students, but assuming

² If your state legislature does not currently provide funding, contact the TWC and work with them to lobby the state legislature to do so. There are eleven other state precedents to draw upon to convince your state legislature that its residents going to college are missing out against these other states that do.

for the week-long seminars one can find ten students to go, the TWC then will hire the faculty member to accompany the students to D.C. to oversee their educational experience and grade them, room and board and a stipend included. For those students who struggle to find the travel and meal funds, often some internal ATU funds can be found to assist at least some of these students in these expenses so they experience D.C. and the benefits of visiting Congress, meeting their congressmembers and getting invaluable networking connections through D.C. and the TWC. While the internships are not just open to political science majors, at ATU our majors get first shot and make up the bulk of students who have gone.

Reflecting on the study away and internship programs have assisted our Department in growing and developing the major, program, and Department, as well enhancing the reputation of all three at the university and in the state. In particular, the budding relationship with TWC has exposed ATU students to the multitude of jobs they can pursue with their degree in political science upon graduation, from working in government to advocating for interest groups, while also giving them the connections to get their foot in the door with these employers. Being from a rural area, more than an hour from the state capitol, job opportunities in political science can seem distant and remote. Bringing students to where those jobs are is invaluable, and putting them in these immersive environments—even if only a week-long program in Washington, D.C.—show them these jobs are possible. Given they are only a week, non-traditional students and those working full-time have been, with enough notice, able to pursue these opportunities. Likewise, minorities—particular ATU Hispanic students—have routinely pursued these funded trips to the U.S. capital. The Arkansas legislature subsidizing TWC seminars and internships have alleviated some obstacles that prevent low socioeconomic students living off campus and/or

working and/or raising a family from participating in ways the other HIPs experiential learning programs have not.

Thus, the ATU political science major program routinely offers UR and internship (or study away) opportunities and has in the past run an Arab League/Model UN team. No program has to do all three (or any), but one invaluable benefit of higher education is giving students unique experiences that can unlock their potential and open new career pathways. HIPs experiential learning practices programs provide hands on practice creates and develops the employable skills of students, while showing them they are capable of doing more than they believed possible. The collective HIPs experiential learning opportunities provide ATU political science majors ample chance to obtain one or more of these experiences over the course of the years they are with us. It also has been helpful in attracting students to the major and retaining them once in it, producing some growth and stability during the tumultuous pandemic era.

Adaptations Programs May Want to Consider

Turning to possible adaptations programs may want to consider, there is restructuring the program into career pathways, modality flexibility and undertaking greater responsibility for marketing to enhance student recruitment to and retention in the program.

Pre-pandemic, the ATU political science faculty restructured its major curriculum in five career pathway tracks (law school; public policy and administration; international relations; strategic studies; American politics, campaigns and elections; and political science graduate school). These elective tracks replaced the more traditional program approach of requiring multiple lower- and upper-level courses across political subfields. More importantly, ATU's political science program is not the only program to do so, as the University of Oregon's R1 Political Science Department uses the same approach (University of Oregon). This was primarily

done for recruitment and retention of students, as current and prospective students (and their parents) tend to inquire what jobs they can get with a political science degree. In fact, it is our experience that many students do not see political science as that different from history, let alone understand that political science has subfields or why they exist and matter. Knowing the political science subfields may be valuable for programs that produce a lot of students going on to graduate school, but at our regional university over the last two decades there have only TWO students attend political science graduate school. With law, business and government service being much more common career pursuits of our graduates, using career tracks that encourages students to take courses most beneficial to their planned career track is much more viable a program structure (for further explanation of the ATU career pathways political science degree, see Rogers 2021, 387–393).

Modality Flexibility: Online & HyFlex Course Options

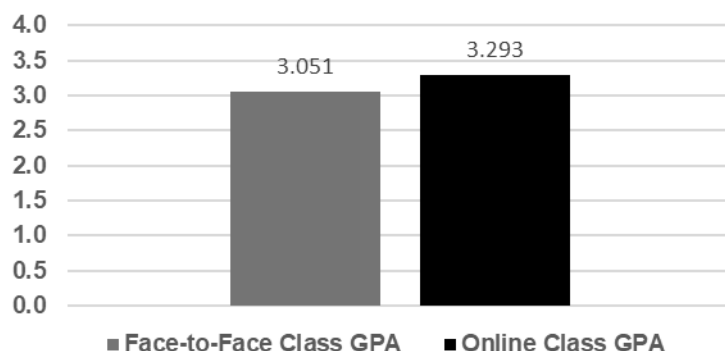
Students, particularly those working or raising families, increasingly want and even require more course modalities than the traditional face-to-face classroom, thereby requiring political science degree programs to better cater to those new and shifting demands. At ATU, between 2012 and 2019 the political science program witnessed a slowly increasing demand for online courses in the traditional fall and spring semesters.³ From 2012 to 2015, our department would offer just one online section of American Government while providing five sections in the traditional face-to-face format. By 2019 (just before the pandemic), we routinely offered four sections of face-to-face classes and two online sections of this general education course, and those sections would all be fully enrolled. For our major-specific courses, we would similarly

³ We saw this shift in online courses before 2015 – summer classes. In the summers of 2010 to 2012, we could offer face-to-face sections of American Government and get high enough student enrollments that the courses would “make.” Beginning in the Summer of 2013, however, with a shift in federal financial aid, the demand for face-to-face sections disappeared. However, the demand for these classes remained, albeit in the online course space.

offer only one major-specific political science course per academic year; but by 2019 that had grown to approximately three online political science courses every semester.

Student self-selection appears to be fueling this increasing demand for online classes. Today, the ATU political science program sees mixed modality and online sections fill faster than the traditional face-to-face sections during the semesterly registration periods. As an example, in the spring of 2024 two sections of American Government were opened for registration on the same day. The online section reached the ten-student threshold three weeks before the face-to-face section reached that institutional required benchmark for the class to run and not be dropped. Nowadays, the typical student in face-to-face sections of American Government are freshman and typically fit the twentieth century student body demographics, while the average online American Government student has a sophomore standing and is more likely to conform to the twenty-first century student body demographics of being older, working and/or raising a family, etc..⁴ Additionally, there is a statistically significant difference in student performance between our face-to-face sections and online sections; students in online sections perform better and earn higher grades than their counterparts in face-to-face classes.

Figure 1. Class GPA in Sections of American Government, Summer 2020 to the Present



⁴ The median class standing for American Government sections in 2019 and 2023 were calculated using freshman = 1, sophomore = 2, junior = 3, and a senior = 4. In 2019, the median for face-to-face sections was a 1 (freshman), while in online sections the median was 2.

Financial demands are one force pushing students into online sections of classes. The costs of higher education have continued to rise for the last two decades. Informal polling of our students in our classes shows that more of our students work jobs today than they did a decade ago to help pay for their university education.

Time demands are a second force pushing students into online sections of classes. Much to their credit, political science students tend to be very involved with campus organizations, from ideological organizations like the College Republicans or the Young Democrats, to Student Government, Pre-Law society, and other campus activities and organizations. To find ways to shoehorn these activities into their busy schedules (as well as working to help pay for college and mitigate the financial demands described above), students need the greater flexibility afforded them with online sections. Having at least some of their courses online affords them that flexibility in both their academic, workplace and family life scheduling, giving them better autonomy over the multiple demands placed upon them.

As Hobbes said, necessity is often the mother of invention and the pandemic created conditions for several innovations in higher education. The integration of teleconferencing platforms in the classroom, compelling campuses to go as paperless as possible, increasing accessibility through multiple devices (cell phones and tablets rather than only laptop or desktop computers), increasing use of e-books, and dramatically increasing Universal Design were all rapidly advanced because of the challenges of pandemic-era teaching (Ovetz 2022, 183–200; Clark 2016, 195–206; DOLMAGE 2017, 115–152). In classroom instruction, one such pandemic-driven innovation is HyFlex courses, which is a single course section that is simultaneously offered as a traditional face-to-face class, a synchronous online course (where students use Zoom or a similar software to watch and engage in the class), and an asynchronous online course (where students

watch the classroom lecture on a schedule independent from the scheduled class meeting time). Additionally, for a class to count as HyFlex, it must be the student's decision (and not the instructors) as to which of these three course modalities that they choose; they can also choose a mix of the formats over the course of the semester(Howell 2022, 173–181).

During the timeframe under examination, the ATU political science program typically offers twelve upper-division political science course sections each academic year. Prior to the pandemic, we offered no HyFlex style classes. Nowadays, approximately one-third of the program course offerings are HyFlex. As of this writing, our program offers at least one online course, as well as three HyFlex courses each semester. The Hyflex options are often upper-level courses and HyFlexing them tends to be necessary to ensure these classes meet the institutional requirement of ten students to run. It also serves those students pursuing the degree online. These students tend to be of the twenty-first century mold, older and working and/or raising families. The online option for completion of the political science degree through flexible modality delivery has also brought some growth to the ATU political science program from other schools that have eliminated their political science degree (University of Fort Smith), as well as more online urban students (from regions like northwest Arkansas) who find the discounted ATU online degree much more affordable than higher education institutions near them, as well as convenient for their full-time work schedules.

Program Marketing

Given the evolving terrain of higher education today, departments, programs and faculty are being asked to do more (often with less resources). Foremost among such responsibilities are marketing and recruitment and retention of students. Within political science, research shows departments and programs have neglected marketing the career pathways and job preparation the

degree provides, both on the recruiting end, the career advisement during time in the program, and for graduates after completion (Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012, 87–92). In the past, it may have been easy for departments and programs to rely on other college or university offices to provide these services. Coordination with such offices by departments and programs may have likewise been minimal. At ATU, the experience has been that our Department and programs have found it necessary to take a more active role and accept more responsibility for marketing and recruitment and retention. As budgets get tight, staff are cut, and higher education institutions are down-sized, the days of professors just being student educators while focusing on research may be luxuries of the past. Moving forward, political science departments should rethink how their program and degree requirements themselves can affect recruitment and retention. With this in mind, given the technology-oriented nature of today's student body, the department and program webpages are essential points of contact with prospective and current students (Phillips 2021; Burt 2021).

One area political science departments and programs should consider investing more time and responsibility in are their websites. Department and program websites should be of high quality and user friendly, which hopefully the institutional marketing office ensures. However, departments and programs need to gain greater control over and invest more time and effort in ensuring their 'message' gets out and often supplying the content to future and current students. Increasingly, prospective students are doing most of their early college research and planning through web searches and web page browsing; on-site visits are beginning to see a decline, starting with the pandemic when campus visits became difficult and now are often virtual. At ATU, our Department had a notoriously twentieth century website that was almost exclusively text based. The website lacked visuals and videos. There were no student testimonials, no

alumni video endorsements of the program, etc. Worse, it had a lot of dead links. As this is a primary and often first point of contact, one can only imagine how many students were lost due to our outdated and dysfunctional website. Only recently has the page been updated and it was largely done inhouse by a department faculty member (Phillips 2021; Arkansas Tech University 2024). Today, often higher education institutions maintain a tight grip on the controls and access to editing their websites(Rogers 2021, 387–393; Ishiyama 2023, 419–424). However, political science departments and programs can enhance their marketing by taking greater responsibility for supplying the content and ensuring audio and visuals are included, as well as program news stories and activities are regularly updated.

Discussion

To conclude, we offer three general pieces of advice after reflecting on the trends in higher education, in political science generally, and our own experiences with the ATU political science program. Discussed in more detail below, they are 1) take today's students and their emphasis on career employment seriously, 2) experiential learning and flexibility in course modality offerings may be the keys to growing political science programs in the twenty-first century, and political science faculty may be well served by taking greater responsibility for the own marketing content, to ensure they are doing all that is possible to recruit and retain students.

First, political science programs may need to increase the focus on careers in political science during the undergraduate student experience. One of the appeals of a degree in political science historically has been its applicability to a variety of careers; this made the degree appealing to many undeclared or undecided students, who would select the major after a few semesters of study. While some career destinations remain well-ensconced in the major (such as those individuals planning on law school after graduation), there is increasing student questions and demand for clearly identifiable additional career paths during their undergraduate years.

Second, political science departments and programs should consider integrating greater flexibility into their course offerings, the format courses are provided in, and the unique educational opportunities their program provides to ensure that, at a minimum, political science maintains its healthy share of students and that programs find opportunities to grow in the twenty-first century. At our rural, medium-sized university the message has been that the needs and interests of the undergraduate student body are changing and evolving more rapidly today in higher education than they were twenty-five years ago when the digital age began or five years ago with the pandemic. The twenty-first century higher education environment is dramatically different than the twentieth century one was. The changing needs and expectations of today's college student body are ignored at the peril of colleges and universities. Having the ability to adapt, whether it is in the modalities of courses that are offered or the types of experiential learning that are offered, have been essential to ATU's political science program remaining healthy and stable over the last decade.

Third, political science departments and faculty likely need to take more responsibility for their own marketing, recruiting, and retention activities as part of their essential department functions. In this era of limited and dwindling resources, political scientists and their departments may find, like at ATU, that the institutional offices that have traditionally provided these services for the university may not adequately provide them for the program. Political science programs and departments may need to become more self-reliant in promoting themselves or at least more collaborative with the relevant university offices, to attract students. Every university has a multitude of academic programs, departments, and units to choose from when it comes to the allocation of resources. Some of those decisions will be to emphasize other academic units (like STEM) as opposed to liberal arts programs like political science (Rogers

2021, 387–393). The trend has been to reduce the higher education funds spent on the liberal arts, instead focusing spending on STEM fields. This will only strain further the already stretched thin department budgets. Additionally, colleges and universities spend their funds on their business colleges, pursuing ties with potential corporate donors who can help fund the institution. Taken together, these forces often result in less funds for promoting and maintaining liberal arts programs like political science.

Conclusion

Whether in their periodic program review or every year, programs should reflect on what political science programs have been doing that work, as well as explore ways it can adapt in this evolving terrain of higher education for continued viability in the twenty-first century. At ATU, we have worked to identify and target new political science major cohorts (like women and minorities, etc.) attracting them with experiential learning HIPs practices like internships, short-term study away programs, UR with faculty and simulations, while better serving more traditional ones like the prelaw students (through creating a prelaw minor and having an active Pre-Law Club). For those students with heavy work schedules, we argue political science programs can increase their online and hyflex upper-division course offerings to better cater to the needs of students' increasingly hectic schedules. We hope readers think of activities presented above as a restaurant menu that offers a lot of *à la carte* options. Sample and try out the pieces desired to see what helps and fits each institution's and program's context and need.

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