

Student Career Development Within Core Political Science Courses

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference
Alexandria Virginia, February 7-9, 2025

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of positive trends in student career development in higher education since the early 2000s. The 'career pathways' approach is considered as one tool for students and educators to utilize in campus-wide and departmental resources and programs. While college and campus-wide career development resources and programs are available to students, faculty and instructors can also consider course assignments and activities to further support students' professional and career development. A review of one semester's experience incorporating professional development assignments in an introductory public policy course can help instructors and institutional leaders further consider ways to appropriately balance and supplement existing campus-wide and departmental student programs and resources with additional professional development opportunities designed for and delivered at the course level.

Introduction¹

The core missions of colleges and universities include helping students learn foundational knowledge and new ways of thinking about the world around them, develop critical thinking and active learning skills, and prepare them for productive professional lives after graduation.² Higher education institutions take these missions and roles seriously, and provide a wealth of

¹ Content from this and the next section of this paper is derived from my new book, *Political Science Career Pathways and Student Professional Development* (Cognella, 2025).

² A cursory review of institutional 'mission statements' developed since 2020 at small, medium and large four-year colleges/ universities finds that some language about student professional and career development is usually presented as an equal core mission or objective among other central institutional missions such as foundational learning, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding and competency.

opportunities for students to explore their professional interests and grow in individual and collaborative ways. Fortunately, over the past two decades colleges and universities have become more supportive and organized in offering services, programs, and guidance for student professional and career development. Yet, these resources are only as good as the effort students put into accessing and utilizing them for their own benefit.

So much has changed in student professional and career development³ since the early 2000s, including the resources available to students, the way higher educational professionals and students work together, and the career options students can now explore and pursue for themselves. This paper discusses some key themes developed in my new book, *Political Science Career Pathways and Student Professional Development* (Cognella, 2025), that originally was intended as an updated edition of my previous book, *Careers in Political Science* (Longman, 2003). In my planning for an intended second edition, I quickly realized that a second edition of the previous book would not work. This is because the ways colleges and universities approach their missions of student career exploration and professional development have changed significantly since the early 2000s, and the options for students to develop professionally while in school are much richer and more plentiful than in the past. As with my prior work, this new project is aimed primarily at students, including declared majors in political science or those exploring the major, and students in related disciplines such as legal studies and public policy. The new book is also intended as a resource for advisors, faculty and instructors who want to help their students be more proactive in their own professional explorations and development.

This paper first describes some newer trends and practices in higher-education career development that have evolved over the last twenty years, including: enhanced opportunities students can utilize to gain *applied workplace skills and experiences* that employers say they need (including internships and applied research and writing); *‘real’ professional networking* which includes meeting and sharing information with alumni, employers and other

³ In this paper and my larger research I sometimes distinguish ‘professional’ from ‘career’ student development because to this writer professional development can encompass a wider range of meanings for students to include work on skills, such as teamwork and leadership, which can be gained through course assignments and activities, campus or off-campus organizational involvement, etc. Career development can connote more direct work on things like identifying and exploring career pathways, gaining an internships to get your ‘foot in the door,’ networking for internship or job leads, etc.

accomplished professionals; *planned happenstance theory* which counsels students to remain open to unexpected, good things that can happen to them; a greater appreciation of and intentionality in promoting and realizing the *values of diversity, equity, and inclusion* in our schools, workplaces, and society in general; new *hybrid approaches to work and work/life balance* that are increasingly relevant since the advent of Covid; and *personalized professional branding* students can shape and reinforce through use of social media and other professional marketing opportunities. Next, the concept of ‘career pathways’ is explored, with attention to how this broad approach to career development often shapes the ways schools organize and deliver their programs. Third, the ongoing challenges schools and academic departments still face in spurring students’ interests in, and actions related to professional and career development are discussed. These challenges point to further work to consider by everyone involved in students’ professional development. This paper then reports on one semester’s experience with testing approaches to adding student professional development assignments in a core ‘Introduction to Public Policy’ course. The mixed results of this experiment and feedback from some in campus and departmental leadership suggest that further consideration is needed in determining the appropriate role, if any, that course instructors can and should play in promoting students’ professional and career development in their courses.

What has changed in student career development since 2004 when *Careers in Political Science* was first published?

Before discussing what has changed, it is useful to review what hasn’t changed. Consider this question: ‘What jobs can I get with a degree in political science?’ As a working political science faculty member and past career development director and advisor for three decades, I’ve been asked this question countless times by prospective and current students (and sometimes their parents!). It is my view, and that of most of my career advising colleagues, that this is the wrong question to ask. Instead, a better initial question might be: ‘What knowledge, skills, tools, habits, experiences and relationships can I develop through completion of my general education and major studies in political science?’ This expansive version of the question

suggests that students can and should attend to their professional development at many points and in many individualized ways during their undergraduate educational experience.

While the core discipline of political science and its associated academic fields remain systematic, dynamic, and engaging, the approaches for how students apply their academic learning to actual efforts towards career exploration and professional development have changed in positive and expansive ways in the last few decades. These changes include:

More and better opportunities for students to engage in their own applied professional development while they are in school: In the early 2000s, students could access internet resources (although very limited compared to today), meet with their academic advisors, seek out and complete internships, and sometimes encounter alumni at departmental or other campus events. Yet, these options, including the career resources and social networking opportunities available on the internet and other social media, were much less extensive and available as compared to now. Today, students have an abundance of easily accessible information at their fingertips on the web, including labor market projections, resume and cover letter guides, professional networking tools including LinkedIn, Handshake, blogs and ePortfolios, and online career development resources and tools offered in higher education, government, industry, and nonprofit sectors. In addition, the options for internships (in-person and virtual) in all career sectors, more of which are now paid, coupled with ongoing applied research and writing opportunities on campus and off, provide many more avenues for students to gain the applied workplace and project-related skills and experiences that employer seek in their new hires.

While most institutions had at least one campus ‘career center’ in the early 2000s, students and faculty didn’t utilize them as much as today, and many departments didn’t make concerted efforts to integrate student career exploration and applied professional development into one or more course offerings. In the past three decades most colleges and universities have acted to bolster their campus-wide career services, and many have supported campus-wide and even departmental efforts to tailor career services to their specific students.⁴

⁴ A description of this trend can be found in Vergara, CY, Testani, JA and Smith, KK, “Leadership Competency Expectations of Employers and the Expanding Mission of Career Centers.” *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 157, 27-37, (2018).

This move to develop more overt and expansive career development services is partly influenced by changing student motivations and expectations regarding why they pursue a college degree. Evidence suggests that millennial students (those attending college in the 2000s to 2010) valued ‘extrinsic’ reasons for attending college (e.g., ‘to make more money’) more than ‘intrinsic’ reasons (e.g., ‘to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas’) as compared to their prior Gen X and Baby Boomer student cohorts.⁵ It also was not uncommon in decades past to encounter faculty members who expressed the sentiment that, ‘It’s not my job to worry about whether my students get a good job after graduation. I’m here to impart core knowledge and critical thinking.’ For many professors and instructors this sentiment has changed, and more are now open to new ways to integrate some professional development learning and activities into their coursework. Many faculty also welcome the suggestions of career advising professionals on how best to do so.⁶ These changes further bolster the importance of students getting into the habit of meeting with their professors or instructors at least once a semester or quarter, which is something we’ve been counseling them to do for decades. The emphasis on internships and service-learning as positive ways to integrate academic and professional aims has also grown, with more academic departments, including political science, offering organized programs in these areas (many with scholarship support), and some even requiring an internship or other experiential option as part of a student’s major requirements.⁷

More and better opportunities for students to expand their professional networks while they are in school: A near-universal edict that advisors impart to students is to ‘network’

⁵ Twenge, J.M and Donnelly, K, “Generational Differences in American Students’ Reasons for Going to College: The Rise of Extrinsic Motives, 1971-2014.” *Journal of Social psychology*, 156(6), 620-29 (2016). 10.1080/00224545.2016.1152214.

⁶ Schlesinger, Jon, et al., “Undergraduate Student Career Development and Career Center Services: Faculty Perspectives.” *The Career Development Quarterly*. Vol. 69, Issue2, June 2021, 145-157. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/cdq.12255>

⁷ Schools have also expanded related special or ‘high impact’ programs to organize ways for students to gain applied workplace or project skills and experiences. For a history of such efforts using internships in political science departments, see Van Vechten, et al., “Political Science Internships: Best Practices.” American Political Science Association (2021). <https://apsanet.org/internshipbook>. A related development is the expanded use of ‘internship-away’ programs. For example, this author has been involved in helping several colleges and universities start up and direct specialized academic internship programs, including semester-long programs in Washington, DC. These programs, along with study abroad/ international internship opportunities, were much less available to political science students in the early 2000s.

with others, including fellow students, alumni, and other professionals as an effective part of their professional development activities. Yet, many students still seem unsure about what networking is, what it can do for them, and how to reach out to others for purposes of building their networks. Some students are shy and reserved, while others are natural networkers even if they don't know they are. While there are many definitions of professional 'networking,' qualitative and even quantitative evidence demonstrates that student and professional networking is a positive tool to develop relationships that can help in career exploration, identification of hidden job opportunities, and overall professional advancement.⁸ For our purposes here, 'networking' is simply the exchange of information with others for mutual benefit. We now can better appreciate that the best networking is conducted by 'keeping it real' in how we all talk to others and share information. This includes just 'being yourself,' and starting by just talking or reaching out to others about simpler things, then working up to more developed discussions and sharing of information as you go. Career centers have done positive work to make student networking less intimidating, including by providing practice scripts and examples to show how good networking is done.

A better understanding of the wider range of career pathways open to students pursuing political science and related degrees, coupled with an appreciation for the role that 'happenstance' can play in one's professional advancement: In past decades, even when this author was an undergraduate, it was often assumed that political science students would pursue careers in government, law, public administration, policy, or teaching, while some would pursue graduate degrees in these or related fields including law or higher education teaching and research. Yet, these common assumptions ran counter to the reality that many graduates with political science degrees were not working in these fields, but instead ended up in business, communications, nonprofit management, journalism, IT, social services, and myriad other positions not accounted for in those paths that were largely being promoted.

⁸ Various studies attempt to measure the benefits of networking, and some have found positive relationships between networking and these various facets of professional development and advancement. These include Forret, M.L. and Dougherty T.W., "Correlates of Networking Behavior for Managerial and Professional Employees." *Group & Organization Management*, 26 (3), 283–311 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601101263004>

Additionally, it is now acknowledged by career development advisors that how political science graduates and others in related disciplines pursue their early career paths and where they end up in their longer-term positions is often at least partly due to ‘happenstance,’ which means their path is influenced by unforeseen or unplanned circumstances. There is even a theory in career development research and practice called ‘planned happenstance’ theory⁹ which is simply the idea that what happens to us in our professional pursuits often is partly the result of chance. Hopefully, such ‘chance’ is a type of ‘luck,’ and the happenstance moment is a very positive one, like when your supervisor decides to take personal leave and asks if you want to take a full-time position to cover her responsibilities. Sometimes, however, chance can play a role in the not-so-good things that can happen, like when you lose your job after your company declares bankruptcy. Planned happenstance is the idea that we should plan for and do things that will increase our chances of good things happening to us.¹⁰ One way to promote this possibility is to remain open to unanticipated opportunities that may arise, even as we purposefully pursue our career plan. What should a student do if they are unexpectedly offered a full-time position at their internship workplace; something they didn’t anticipate? The issue, then, is to consider whether this new, unexpected opportunity is right for them in the present, and for their future. This happenstance situation is something that a student’s network (friends, family, co-workers, supervisors, mentors) can help them manage, provided they have a positive network to turn to.

Professional networking supports the notion that students should embrace the reality that some amount of happenstance is likely to happen in their lives. Our meetings and interactions with others can open new opportunities we wouldn’t even consider without networking and expose us to additional ways of thinking and stretching ourselves beyond our

⁹ See, for example, Mitchell, Kathleen, Levin, Al and Krumboltz, John, "Planned Happenstance: Constructing Unexpected Career Opportunities." *Journal of Counseling and Development: JCD* 77.2, 115-24 (1999). <https://www.proquest.com/docview/219013492?parentSessionId=p2tRkLjkEVds6QOR73gGrdOqBlqYxD05Y6Wnz5%2Fo%2BKY%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=465>.

¹⁰ In my first book, *Intern to Success* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), a core premise of using internships for career advancement was in part based on the following: ‘Success (however you define it) is a combination of preparation and luck.’ My experience in career advising is that most students can become good at the preparation part, (e.g., planning and hard work) but sometimes struggle with the ‘luck’ part (e.g., being open to considering and acting on unexpected opportunities).

current assumptions and actions. And for students, participating in student or community groups, volunteering and developing paid work experiences, and completing one or more internships can be user-friendly ways for students to get their ‘foot in the door’ in places and situations they are interested in or want to explore further, and can certainly increase the chances that good things, expected or not, can happen to them.

A greater openness among workers and employers to consider flexible approaches to work and work/life balance: A primary consideration for most of us in choosing career pathways and making decisions about employment opportunities has been starting salary, and potential for pay advancement. We all need to ‘make a living’ right? Yet, considerations about other benefits, including work schedules and related arrangements, have also been a factor to consider in deciding on one career path, or even specific position, over another. Young professionals who value stability and predictability may be more comfortable with 9am-6pm office schedules (thus, for example, these folks might be more open to government work), while others who work better independently might seek jobs where they have more say over how and when they get their work done, often outside of the office. (e.g., political campaign managers and consultants often work in this mode.) In general, there may be some upsides and downsides to both arrangements. For example, 9am-6pm office workers might have greater stability, office support, and camaraderie with fellow workers, but also higher daily commuting and related costs associated with working outside the home. Independent workers may enjoy being able to work more on their own and at the place of their choosing, but the arrangement might fit better for self-starters who are comfortable working away from collaborators or team-members. In the past and currently, some employers are willing to negotiate a hybrid work situation, where maybe they allow you to work from home one or two days a week, or even more.

The advent of the global Covid-19 pandemic in early 2021 has changed the dynamics of work styles and work-life balance in significant ways, although the longer-term effects remain to be seen.¹¹ What was once offered as a limited option by some employers, ‘remote’ and

¹¹ For an initial perspective on more immediate changes Covid has brought to the workplace, and a reasoned set of factors to consider for future career decisions, see Vyas, Lina, “New Normal’ at Work in a Post-COVID World:

‘hybrid’ internship opportunities are much more common choices for students to consider today. While this trend offers new avenues for students to overcome traditional challenges to working in one or more internships, such as place and time, it also is changing the internship landscape in ways we don’t fully understand. For example, some internship employers who suspended their in-person internship programs during the Covid shutdowns have not restarted them or have moved to hybrid or exclusively remote offerings.

A greater understanding of and more concerted efforts to address challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education programs, workplaces and career

advancement: The term ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ (DEI) has become almost ubiquitous in not only how we articulate our growing recognition of past societal, legal, and institutional structures and practices of bias, inequality, and injustice, but also as a statement of intent and goals for higher education and employment sectors including government, nonprofits, and for-profits. As Melanie Buford aptly describes it: “People of different gender, racial, cultural, and generational identities, with a range of different abilities and goals, infuse new priorities into both higher education and the marketplace, expanding the international conversation on the nature of meaningful work and recontextualizing our pressing social, technical, and political challenges.”¹² While some progress has been made in recognizing past bias, inequities and injustice that are endemic in U.S. society, and in articulating and acting on more proactive ways to realize the values of DEI in our educational and employment systems, much more work is needed to continue real progress and no doubt this effort will involve necessary multi-generational change.¹³¹⁴

Work–life Balance and Labor Markets,” *Policy and Society*, Volume 41, Issue 1, 155–167 (March 2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puab011>

¹² Buford, Melanie, “Present and Future Innovation in Career Education,” *Mapping the Future of Career Education*. Melanie Buford, Michael Sharp, and Michael Stebleton (eds.), Routledge, P. 11 (2023).

¹³ For multiple perspectives on these ongoing challenges, see Thomas, Dave and Arday, Jason (eds.), *Doing Equity and Diversity for Success in Higher Education: Readdressing Structural Inequalities in the Academy*, Palgrave Macmillan (2021).

¹⁴ Just in its first week the new Trump Administration (2025) has launched concerted efforts to undo existing DEI programs in the federal government, and among governmental and nonprofit programs that receive at least some federal funding. In addition, many colleges and universities that receive portions of state funding, including my employer the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Wisconsin State Government), are curtailing or eliminating campus DEI programs. In the 2023/ 24 period, UW Madison eliminated its DEI programs and reassigned all staff and instructors working on those programs to other offices and units. See Kremer, Rich, “UW Regents Reverse

As part of this larger global reckoning about the realities and aims of DEI, the discipline of political science has also grappled with foundational and practical issues involving DEI in various areas involving research, teaching, student development, and faculty and staff support. In its 2011 task force report, *Political Science in the 21st Century*, the APSA asked: “Is political science positioned to embrace and incorporate the changing demographics, increasing multicultural diversity, and ever-growing disparities in the concentration of wealth present in many nation-states? Can political science do so within its research, teaching, and professional development?”¹⁵ The short answer to these questions, paraphrased here, is: ‘While some progress has been made, and political science compares mostly favorably with other social science disciplines, much work still needs to be done in several disciplinary areas including faculty hiring, research and teaching support, and special discipline-specific programs.’ It is in the latter, special discipline-specific programs, where many political science student resources and services involving career and professional development are found.

A greater understanding of the importance of personal ‘branding’ and better tools to shape and manage our brands: What is personal branding, and why should students be thinking about it? According to Jodi Philbrick and Ana Cleveland, personal branding “is an introspective process by which you define yourself professionally...and can serve as your pathway to professional success.”¹⁶ There are many facets of branding we can explore, which include developing a working brand identity that you can shape and refine as you seek to differentiate yourself from the crowd, projecting your brand in various real-world ways including through behavior, communication, and symbolism, and ongoing evaluation of your brand image as you work to fulfill your personal and professional objectives.¹⁷ As with the practice of professional networking, the concept of branding is not new. But appreciation for

Position: Accept GOP Deal on Funding and Limits to DEI programs.” Wisconsin Public Radio, December, 2023.

<https://www.wpr.org/education/uw-regents-dei-programs-funding-robin-vos>

¹⁵ American Political Science Association, Task Force Report, “Political Science in the 21st Century” (2011), p.1. https://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/Task%20Force%20Reports/TF_21st%20Century_AllPgs_webres90.pdf.

¹⁶ Philbrick, Jodi and Cleveland, Ana, “Personal Branding: Building Your Pathway to Professional Success,” *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 34:2, 181-189 (2015). DOI: [10.1080/02763869.2015.1019324](https://doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2015.1019324).

¹⁷ Khedher, Manel, “Personal Branding Phenomenon,” *International Journal of Information, Business and Management*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 29-40 (2014). <https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/personal-branding-phenomenon/docview/1511120777/se-2>

the potential benefits of branding for students' professional advancement is more widely recognized and more purposefully practiced among college students and young professionals than before. Such awareness of the potential power of branding has only accelerated with the advent and development of social media and related digital communications tools. Thinking about how to shape and manage your brand now will not only help promote the best 'you' that you want to project, but also help you avoid the pitfalls of projecting unintentional or misguided social media personas moving forward. There are various practical ways students can explore, shape and project their brands, including through their use of 'elevator statements,' language to describe themselves in cover letters or profiles, and in accessible formats such as blogs and ePortfolios.

Career pathways and student professional development

While many students who enter college are still unsure about their professional futures, some already have a working plan for their short and longer-term professional objectives. Wherever a student is in their career exploration and development (not knowing, exploring, or already with a set plan), the concept of a 'career pathway' is a useful although not exclusive or perfect tool among others they can utilize to set goals and strategies to explore and advance their professional objectives as a student and beyond. The pathway concept is an open-ended approach that can help students act more deliberately about their professional development and career advancement, while they are students and into their career years. It can also help them make choices about academic majors, minors, and other certificates they might consider that are commonly associated with that career pathway. For example, for someone interested in pursuing a career path in political journalism and polling analysis, in addition to choosing political science as a major they might also pursue communications or journalism, and perhaps a minor in statistics or quantitative analysis.

The use of career pathways as a model for student career development advising and programming has grown more prevalent over recent decades.¹⁸ Many college or university

¹⁸ Whitaker, Judy, "Career Pathways: What Are They And Why Do We Need Them." *Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers (J3)*, v83 n6 p22-23, Sep 2008.

career centers and even individual academic departments or programs organize their career services at least partly along the lines of the career pathways, although they may not label what they do a 'pathway.' Instead, they may organize their approach along the lines of 'career clusters' or 'career communities,' for example, and in myriad other ways.¹⁹ Here are three specific examples of how colleges and universities employ different variants of the career pathways model.

Arkansas Tech

The Political Science Department at Arkansas Tech has reoriented its curriculum and supporting programs and advising around professional and career 'tracks' to include identified possible positions students might pursue, such as: Law School Track, which is geared towards "those interested in law school and judicial branch careers," Public Policy/ Administration Track, which aims to prepare students for positions in "Government-agencies, think tanks, and interest-groups," International Relations Track for "Diplomats or work with multinational organizations and corporations," and American Politics, Campaigns and Elections Track, which may be of interest to students interested in "political campaign and political-party work" and in "pursuing elected office." Other tracks include Strategic Studies and Political Science Graduate Study.²⁰

University of Oregon

The curriculum in the University of Oregon's Political Science Department is organized around career 'clusters' to include Politics, Law and Justice (with specific examples of jobs such as judge, clerk, attorney, legislative analyst, police, community organizer), Public Policy and Political Action (government agency, campaign manager, lobbyist, investigative journalist, congressional aide), Global Engagement (foreign-service officer, teacher, business executive, refugee activist, international lawyer, journalist), and Ethics, Identity and Society (public defender, community organizer, investigative journalist, environmental activist,

¹⁹ See for example, "What are Career Communities." SuccessWorks at University of Wisconsin, Madison. <https://successworks.wisc.edu/what-are-career-communities/>

²⁰ Source: Norman Career Resources, Arkansas Tech University. <https://www.atu.edu/career/index.php>

representative/local, state, or national, NGO leader, school administrator), among other potential paths.²¹

University of Wisconsin, Madison

The College of Letters & Science career center, SuccessWorks, utilizes a ‘career communities’ approach which offers options for students from all Letters & Science majors, including, among others: Nonprofit Management and Education, Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife, and Government, Policy, International Affairs and Law. Within each of these communities are various ideas and options for students to consider such as choice of majors and certificates, internships options to explore through ‘Handshake,’ an online platform for student opportunities now used by many schools, and examples of campus alumni who are working in positions related to that community. Within the Government, Policy, International Affairs and Law community, for example, are a host of worksheets, weblinks, scholarship opportunities, college-specific programs and events, and alumni testimonials describing various career options students might consider, including government, politics, nonprofits, law and international affairs. Students who’ve declared political science are primarily drawn to this career community, but many students are also interested in other communities which overlap in many ways. As described by Emmeline Prattke, designated advisor for the Government, Policy, International Affairs and Law Community at SuccessWorks, “If you are a political science student interested in commerce or health, there are other advisors who specialize in those areas...political science students have a ton of options depending on what’s in line with your interests and goals.”²²

What can pathway advancement Look like? Whether you conceive and apply the concept of a career pathway as a path, track, community, etc., the idea (and goal) is that your efforts will result in advancement from lower-level positions or opportunities to higher-level positions which can bring more responsibilities, prestige, and better pay and related benefits.

²¹ University Career Center, University of Oregon. <https://career.uoregon.edu/>

²² Prattke, Emmeline. “SuccessWorks on Badgers on Track and Microinternships”: *Bascom 1050 Podcast*, Political Science Department, University of Wisconsin, Madison. <https://soundcloud.com/user-311056976-906363553/successworks-on-badgers-on>

These examples of the many possible career pathways one might pursue are a good start to exploring steps to attain that ‘dream job’ one might aspire to. Such steppingstones include things students can start in school, including learning special skills or gaining additional certifications. Some paths also require students at some point to attain graduate-level degrees or certified training (e.g., gaining a law degree to work as a lawyer who has joined the bar).

There are many variations within these broad career themes students might pursue and niches they might occupy through work and advancement. Some of their ‘pivots’ along the way can be deliberate (pivoting within a given path, or even changing to another path altogether), and some might be the result of unplanned circumstances, sometimes good and sometimes not, that cause them to alter their plan. This is part of the ‘happenstance’ reality discussed above.

Another way students can identify and pursue their possible path is to look around and identify people doing things they would like to do, and professional positions they would like to attain in the future, to include those ‘dream jobs’ that we’ve all aspired towards at some point in our work history. In the pathways approach, students can research people’s own pathways to learn how they attained their current position. Better yet, they can talk with people directly and gain insights into their own career aspirations. This type of modeling is a prime value of networking, which all accomplished professionals routinely do. Fortunately, a student’s home college or university will have a ready network of school alumni who can provide more direct insights into the pathways and specific positions of interest.

Further strategies for student professional development and career exploration

How can we as educators further promote students’ professional aims and capabilities in ways that build off our existing campus resources and programs? This question stems from a perennial challenge we all face to motivate students to utilize the professional opportunities we offer. In a 2023 survey of 3000 student respondents, for example, 30 percent of students say they have never accessed a career center at their school, with an additional 20 percent

reporting they had only visited a career center once.²³ An additional challenge is that students report being inundated by campus messages to the point where they often tune out or completely disregard the messages they receive about campus opportunities and programs.²⁴ Despite our concerted efforts and substantial budgets aimed to meet students' career expectations and needs, the fact remains that many students don't fully access the services we already provide. Some faculty and instructors seek to find ways to engage students around their own professional and career development in their courses and are open to assistance from career center communities in how to do so.²⁵

To address such concerns, colleges/ universities often offer mandatory or suggested career course requirements for their students, in one form or another. These include freshman 'gateway' courses such as Maryville College's 'College Works' course, or Bryant College's mandatory freshman career course that covers topics such career exploration and professional networking.²⁶ Political science departments can also offer a designated major course on career development, such a PS 316 'Careers in Political Science' (1 upper-level credit) offered by the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.²⁷ These offerings are positive additions to core departmental foundational learning and college and campus-wide career services. But even with all the resources, programs and opportunities we currently offer, are we realizing the full potential of student career exploration and deliberate professional development in the overall college learning experience?

There may be ways to further expose students to career exploration and individualized professional development through core course content and assignments. The following

²³ Flaherty, Colleen, "Students Sound Off on Career Centers." *Inside Higher Education*. Nov. 23, 2023. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2023/11/30/survey-what-college-students-want-career>

²⁴ Rowsell, Juliette, "Students Feel 'Spammed' by Overload of University Emails." *Inside Higher Education*, Jan. 17, 2025. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/2025/01/17/students-feel-spammed-overload-university-emails>

²⁵ Schlesinger, Jon, et al., "Undergraduate Student Career Development and Career Center Services: Faculty Perspectives." *The Career Development Quarterly*. Vol. 69, Issue2, June 2021, 145-157. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/cdq.12255>

²⁶ "Students Sound Off on Career Centers."

²⁷ Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin, Madison. <https://polisci.wisc.edu/courses/>

approaches were tested in two sections of my introduction to public policy course at UW Madison during the fall 2024 semester.

The experience of Pol. Sci. 272, Introduction to Public Policy

Professional development was incorporated into two fall 2024 sections of Introduction to Public Policy in direct and indirect ways. Five activities were assigned to students throughout the course as outlined in the course syllabus, counting for a total of 5% of the course grade.

Students who completed four out of five of the activities received full credit (100%) for that 5% portion. The activities were derived from content and exercises outlined in my *Political Science Career Pathways* book. Students had the option of purchasing a preliminary digital edition of the book through the publisher, or they could gain free access to copies that I placed on two-hour library reserve.

These activities were:

1. Identify and reflect upon two or more academic areas of interest, as selected from the list of all organized subsections held at the 2023 Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association.
2. Complete a personal and work values survey instrument.
3. Explore career resources and services at UW Madison that are available to you.
4. Map and briefly discuss one or two potential career pathways of interest to you.
5. Craft one or more elevator pitches for yourself that describe your professional and/or career interests, current activities and aims for future advancement.

This paper provides a rudimentary report (via simple tally) and brief discussion of students' responses to activities #3 and #4.

Further ways to model the work of professionals located in various positions related to core learning in political science courses

A further way to interest students in the processes of public policy development and analysis is to humanize the people and processes involved by profiling professionals working in politics and public affairs, such as elected and appointed officials, government staffers, interest group leaders, and specialists in areas such as communications, law, advocacy, IT, media, research and analysis. In class lectures and through invited class speakers I weave into the discussion the

examples of 'key players' in the issue areas we are examining, including their paths to current success and their range of skills, experiences, and positive attributes they bring to their work.

For the two sections of my fall class I assigned students to do at least one short (30 min. or so) interview with a professional of their choice, younger or more senior professional, school alumni contact, family friend, etc., to gain insights into their (the student's) required, analytical policy project of choice, which culminates in a 4-5 page analytical and prescriptive paper (interview and reflective write-up counting towards 10% of final course grade). I also prompted students to consider asking their interview subjects career-oriented questions where appropriate, such as what they like (or dislike) about their professional field, what challenges they have encountered, what they do to be successful in their job, and tips they might offer for students considering their or a similar field. I emphasize that this assignment is supposed to be fun and low stress. Students wrote a short 2-3 page 'write-up' of their findings summarizing the insights gained about their policy issue and, in many cases additional insights about their subject's career pathway and current work. While students often seem hesitant at first to do the interview and required short write-up, most say they found it to be a valuable exercise, and some even appreciated having to use it as a course requirement as a premise to approach other professionals to request additional meetings. For those students who felt particularly uncomfortable reaching out to interview professionals directly I allowed them to instead craft a profile of a public figure from public sources who is doing important work in their policy area of interest. Again, while the primary focus is on gaining insights into their policy topic, these students were encouraged to also consider and reflect upon their subjects' career pathways, professional development, and notable impacts they were making.

Identifying and tracking students' professional interests and aims, and exploring the potential for using class assignments to reinforce them

The following tallies compiled from students' responses to class assignments (out of 100 students total) and their work on an individual policy issue analysis of choice provided me an ongoing sense of the students' interests and aims which also allowed me to tailor and

customize my course lectures and class discussions to topics related to many students' interests. Additionally, such information is proving useful in my exploration of possible adjustments to teaching and learning approaches for future, similar courses.

Assignments and student tallies

For assignment #3, which required students to identify departmental, campus and other special program resources devoted to their professional and career development, students found and reported on a wide range of campus resources, including:

--Department of Political Science: Resources include website pages outlining career and professional development opportunities in political science, the uses of networking and alumni mentorships, internships, and applied research, a four-year career planning guide, a regularly updated jobs/ internships board, and information on the department's career development course and events (e.g. workshops, alumni receptions).

--Several other Departments in Social Sciences and Other Discipline Areas: Students reported finding and exploring career resources offered in their home departments including sociology, legal studies, history, economics, engineering, journalism, and business. Most of these departments had at least one designated, full-time career advisor and all of them offered a mixture of elements in the regular menu of a designated careers course, regular newsletters, workshops, internship advising and support, and opportunities for engaging with departmental alumni.

--'SuccessWorks'/ College of Letters & Science: Offers several one-credit Canvas online professional development/ careers classes, drop-in and appointment advising, web resources including worksheets and links, alumni 'career conversations' videos, interview practice, discipline-specific events with alumni/ employers. Very recently added resources for course instructors to include professional/ career content in their courses, including syllabus language.

-- College of Letters & Science Home Pages: Include a matrix of various applied skills and knowledge categories offered in each college major and certificate program of study, examples of alumni career pathways and list of companies that have employed college alumni from various disciplines in the past.

--Campus Career Exploration Center: Focus on exploring and defining academic and career goals. Includes drop-in and appointment advising and computer-aided modules.

--Campus-Wide Advising and Career Services: Offers career exploration help and advising for undeclared and declared majors, workshops, and events supporting career advisors in all disciplines.

--Center for Pre-law Advising: Includes advising events, canvas modules and website resources to include law-oriented internships and part-time position opportunities.

--UW Student Jobs: A campus-wide listing of paid part-time jobs (on and off campus) and internships available to all UW students, updated regularly.

--UW and College-Wide Job/ Career Fairs: Include the fall campus fair and several topical fairs held throughout the academic year including those focused on nonprofit, international and STEM fields. Co-organized by various campus units including SuccessWorks and Campus-wide Advising and Career Services.

--Badger Bridge: Sponsored and organized by the UW Alumni Foundation, this platform helps connect students to UW alumni who are working in students' fields of interest and are available to communicate virtually or in person on career advice including resume help, internships, expanding professional networks, and other mentorship activities.

Handshake: UW Madison subscribes to Handshake services which help connect students to work and internship opportunities and professional contacts. Workshops on how to make the most of Handshake are regularly offered to students.

Other High-Impact Programs: These include the campus-wide Wisconsin in Washington, DC academic internship program and the International Internship Program.

This assessment of the resources students identified and their brief explanations of how they found them, and whether and how much they use them provides a broad if imperfect picture on how much information about campus career resources is 'breaking through' to students and how apt they are to utilize them. Clearly, many students were already aware of some resources available to them, and many have utilized one or more of the resources to date. Other students gained a better sense of what was available even as they have not yet utilized the resources. Some students commented that the assignment reminded them about the resources available and even a few said the assignment spurred them to plan to act sooner rather than later.

For assignment #4, mapping and briefly discussing one or two potential career pathways of interest, students briefly reported and reflected on the following:

law (38) international affairs (9) healthcare (8)
health (4) Federal government (7) state/ local government (3)
Federal legislative affairs state legislative affairs
political consulting (6) lobbying (5) advocacy (4) politics/ public service (3)
political campaigns policy analyst (5) data analyst (4) think tank (2)

nonprofit management (6) social work (2) social services social justice
 finance (5) economics (3) business management (2) business (2) marketing
 public relations STEM fields (5) Intelligence/ security military (ROTC)
 higher education/ professional (3) K-12 teaching (2) sports management
 not sure/ still considering

This assignment reinforced what I've learned about students in political science classes, even those classes that attract many non or double-majors: A significant number (often over half) of students are considering or are set in their planning to attend law school either right out of college or after working for one or more years first. Another group of students is already anticipating an identifiable career pathway, while others are considering more than one distinct and separate pathway (e.g., law or communications). Very few students seem not able or not willing to identify at least one pathway they might be considering, even tentatively. Those students with a clearer sense of their anticipated pathway also seemed clearer on supplemental steps or activities they will pursue, such as adding a certificate (i.e., 'minor') and pursuing applied work experiences such as internships related to that pathway.

Students' policy/ career interviews (public profiles not included). This assignment has been a requirement in my policy-oriented political science courses for several years as a useful step for students to conduct primary research for their chosen policy issue project. Even when used as a primarily policy/ research endeavor students often reported back some professional/ career insights that were offered during the 'policy' interview. Thus, it was not too much of a stretch to add simple language to this fall's assignment prompt raising the possibility of asking one or more professional/ career-oriented questions. Most of the interview/ reflective write-ups this semester touched on at least one or more career development topics.

Students interviewed and reflected on subjects' answers in the career areas below (again, student public profiles were not included, nor were those late assignments submitted outside of Canvas):

corporate/ project manager (5) owner, several assisted living facilities
 higher education academic (5) higher education advising (3)
 law/ corporate (3) law/ environment (2) Law/ public interest (2)
 law/ immigration (2) Law/ US prosecutor law/ criminal attorney

law/ higher education policy law student medical doctor/ researcher (4)
 physician's assistant medical student nursing home administrator
 think tank/ policy analyst (2) journalist
 policy analyst/ Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources US Representative (2)
 federal government/ international affairs Wisconsin Assembly member (3)
 Wisconsin Senate member (2) chief of staff State Senate office
 US Senator's general counsel US Mayor US City Council member
 Wisconsin State project manager/ Forward Fund
 program manager/Wisconsin state DNR supervisor federal probation
 project manager/ international human rights social policy advocate
 affordable housing nonprofit/ founder and director abortion rights advocate
 US Naval officer CIA agent K-12 district programs manager
 author/ geopolitical strategist fundraiser/ Democratic National Committee

The policy issue/ career interviews and reflective write-ups were clearly the most impactful exercises for the students. Some students reported they found leads for people to interview through UW's Badger Bridge platform or Handshake, or through their home department's alumni network. In completing the interviews, the students not only gained more direct, insider perspectives on their policy issues but in many cases useful information about their subject's particular work, education and training. In addition, whether through direct questioning by the student or not, the interviewees often shared tips for students on career preparation and insights into the career field involving both good and not-so-good aspects of their work and responsibilities. Additional personal histories and perspectives shared include those 'happenstance moments' that sometimes shaped the subject's own career pathway in unexpected ways. As a bonus, some interviewees also shared the names and contact information of other professionals the students might contact for further networking. Finally, many interview insights and tips were also shared by students with each other during designated 'policy roundtable' breakout group sessions held during several concluding class meetings.

Students' final policy issue analyses and reports. This final course assignment, which is required in lieu of a final exam (worth 30% of final course grade), offers students the opportunity to delve into an issue-area of particular importance to them. It is expected that many students will choose issues that relate to their academic areas of interest and potentially

their prospective career pathways. An additional benefit of this assignment, which I outline in the assignment prompts, is that this final ‘takeaway’ from the course, if done well, can serve as an effective research/ writing sample that many future employers and others (including internship and fellowship selection committees) often will request from their applicants. Here is an overview of the students’ paper topics which were submitted on time, on Canvas:

elections/ campaigns (5) housing affordability (8) immigration (9)
 healthcare (8) environment/ climate change (10) K-12 education (8)
 gun violence (5) wildlife (3) elder care (2) Medicaid expansion (2)
 opioid crisis (2) prescription drugs public health (2) prenatal leave
 drug legalization mental health Wisconsin abortion/ reproductive rights (2)
 poverty SNAP reforms Wisconsin Moving Forward reform
 labor rights JOBS Act pandemic preparedness transgender rights
 childcare expansion prison treatment females incarceration rates/ recidivism (2)
 death penalty policing reforms housing/ racial equity
 school/ community book bans (2) DEI schools clean energy light pollution
 nitrate contamination green urban design gene editing
 green chemistry digital divide social media regulation TIKTOK China trade tariffs China
 Taiwan's defense tribal sovereignty widening US wealth disparity
 corporate responsibility tax reform telecommunications reform passenger rail expansion

Assessments of the supplemental professional/ career development course content

The experience with considering ways to integrate career and professional development into course content, such as the pilot activities and assignments described in this paper, has provided useful further insights into students’ thinking about their career development and aims. From an instructor standpoint, there is utility in prompting students to further consider connections between academic learning and professional/ career development, in directed and individualized class moments. This approach can be considered a supplement to other institutional resources offered and, hopefully, those resources will be fully utilized by all students in their own unique and particularized ways. Through activities and assignments, instructors can gain a fuller picture of their students’ particular interests and aims, and encourage them to make connections and be more proactive and purposeful in seeking out examples of professionals doing real work in their fields, tracking ways to explore and excel in

fields of interest, and to consider and pursue opportunities available to them as parts of their overall higher-education learning and growth experience.

For this course pilot, I did not provide any post-course surveys on whether and how the professional/ career development course assignments actually impacted the students' educational experience. Future instructors can consider a specific survey instrument for this purpose along with the other activities they incorporate in their classes. In my regular campus course evaluations for the two course sections (35% response rate) only three students mentioned the extra career assignments at all (all three were positive), and no negative feedback was shared even as some students did share negative feedback on other facets of the course. (This 'less than positive' feedback is part of the ongoing instructional learning process, even if it stings a bit!) The reactions of students to the assignments were more numerous, and overall positive, during brief class discussions and debriefs on the assignments. In comparison with prior courses without the extra assignments, more students were eager to meet after class or during office hours to discuss questions and ideas involving their professional and career development.

As an instructor with a long record of working directly in various career/ professional development programs (including residential, intern-away semester programs), I still aim to find a better balance between promoting core discipline learning with real-world applications. But clearly there is no one model to propose here. Some institutions, perhaps those with less resources and institutional support to devote to student professional/ career development, may welcome ways for faculty to coordinate with campus career offices and offer more faculty-to-student opportunities in these areas, even within their traditional, core courses. Other institutions with existing multiple resources and offices devoted to professional/ career development (such as UW Madison), may favor a more differentiated approach, where instructors are expected to focus on core, discipline learning in their courses while referring students to other career resources already available elsewhere when and where appropriate.

For instance, the feedback I received from departmental and college leadership at my institution on this 'trying out' of ways to further inculcate professional/ career student development in my core courses was that I should not include formal course activities and

assignments in my syllabus related to such development. Instead, I should remain focused on delivering discipline and core course learning as traditionally understood, using existing course descriptions and past instructor syllabi as a guide. This approach to the balance, namely, to refrain from direct content and activities related to student professional/ career development, is understandable and, again, perhaps more warranted in larger institutions that may have more devoted resources for designing, staffing and operating career offices, centers, and high-impact programs such as intern-away semesters and alumni mentorships. At the same time, even in larger institutions with multiple sites serving professional/ career development aims there still may be open options to realize the right balance among different academic units and schools. For example, UW Madison's College of Letters & Science central career center, Successworks, has recently begun promoting a 'career integration' approach and outreach to College faculty and instructors, with this and related messages:

Career Integration is the intentional inclusion within academic coursework and experiences of ways for students to identify, articulate and apply the foundational skills learned through a degree from the College of Letters & Science...These Career Integration resources for faculty and staff are designed to complement existing course materials.²⁸

Such outreach includes links to syllabus language, worksheets, and outside URL links that instructors may incorporate in their courses.

In the case of Political Science at UW Madison and perhaps some other College of L & S departments, integration means a more concerted effort to point students to and promote the existing centralized career resources in the College and campus-wide and, in the case of Political Science, the department's designated one-credit 'career course.' Other departments and programs in the social sciences and elsewhere may strike the balance differently with an openness to and even support for faculty and instructors who seek to more directly engage students in professional/ career development through assignments such as those described above, where appropriate.

²⁸ SuccessWorks, UW Madison L & S career services, at: <https://successworks.wisc.edu/career-integration-resources-for-faculty-staff/?preview=true>

Conclusion

In looking forward, it is vital that political science continues its efforts to remain a popular choice of major for undergraduates, and to stay current on ways to inculcate core knowledge and skills (e.g., critical ‘active’ thinking, research, teamwork, writing and other forms of effective communication) and engagement on current and perennial questions facing societies in general. Our faculty, instructors, and departmental and institutional leaders should continue to consider course-specific content to promote these worthy aims while also supporting efforts to prepare students for meaningful and productive careers. All our efforts will acknowledge our understanding of the importance of keeping the discipline relevant and attractive for undergraduates not only as a worthy academic and scholarly endeavor, but also as a sound investment of our students’ time, efforts, and resources.

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