

# Comparative Politics Newsletter

The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association

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## Letter from the Editors: Training the Next Generation of Comparative Politics Scholars

by Matt Golder & Sona N. Golder

The Pennsylvania State University

with the data set, *Archigos: A Database on Political Leaders*.

### *I. Symposium*

Welcome to the Fall 2015 issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter. Our current issue includes a symposium on training the next generation of comparative politics scholars, a special topic looking at the evolving situation in Ukraine, and an overview of recent developments

We are incredibly grateful to the individuals who contributed to our symposium on training the next generation of comparative politics scholars. This is an important topic and our contributors all have an excellent track record in training and placing graduate students, as well as in receiving awards for their teaching and men-

## Improving Graduate Education through the Undergraduate Curriculum

by Jeffrey K. Staton

Emory University

In my first year of graduate school, I had what I take to be a relatively common experience for a political scientist. The first few weeks of my program were a bit like learning a foreign language. I did not understand much of what was being said, but I figured that if I listened and tried to imitate my teachers I might eventually gain some fluency. Near the end of that first semester, after many of the words started to make a little sense, I fully accepted that the material and the approach being taught were not what I had expected to learn while completing my undergraduate major in political science.

I certainly recognized some things, like the ideas that a model was an abstraction of the world and that a model might structure both observation and the normative conclusions that you draw from data analysis. To say that I recognized these ideas does not imply that I understood the practical implications of being committed to them, much less did I recognize more than a few examples of core models in political science. By November, I was being asked to choose a whole slate of new courses, to identify research projects, and to build relationships with likely mentors. This process was guided by the mentors I had identified prior to starting graduate school, which as I have suggested, were selected via a pretty vague understanding of the discipline. This was not an ideal situation. Information about graduate programs certainly seems better today than it was when I was applying, but my experience still seems to be fairly common. New Ph.D. students, even those who were undergraduate majors in political science, are commonly surprised not just by the level of rigor of graduate school, but by the substance of the discipline itself. This state of affairs is problematic per se. It is also related in an important way to the questions that the editors of the Newsletter, Matt and Sona, posed about the future of graduate education.

What should a modern Ph.D. program in comparative politics look like? Faculty at Ph.D. granting institutions spend a considerable amount of time with this question. I suspect that there is a strong general agree-

ment in the field about the goals of our programs. We all want to produce substantively oriented and theoretically informed scholars who publish methodologically rigorous work. We also want to produce engaged and effective teachers. Unfortunately, there is no consensus over the meaning of “methodologically rigorous,” “theoretically informed,” and “substantively oriented,” and our disagreements about meaning account for much of our near constant debates about the precise components of graduate education and the order in which they should be covered. However we approach it, we do seem to agree that our programs require time, so that core lessons can be built upon sensibly. This means sequences or groups of courses and activities, which crowd out other opportunities. Naturally, when we are not tinkering with courses, we are offering students advice about how to evaluate the time allocation tradeoffs they confront. Should she take that new course on text analysis or that great course on transitions that hasn’t been offered in years? Should he spend the summer learning new technical skills, reading histories of leadership, or taking a preliminary research trip to a likely field site?

In light of our diverse understandings of what it means to train a productive scholar, there will be no consensus about how to evaluate these tradeoffs. However, what I believe we can do is make it easier for new graduate students to evaluate them. We can make the consequences of their tradeoffs clearer. Rather than attacking this problem at the graduate level, where we can no doubt clarify some things, I want to suggest that we focus on our undergraduates. Admittedly, this is a longer-term strategy, but it is a more robust one than the typical tinkering we do with our graduate programs. It will also compel us to question whether our undergraduate programs are effective for anyone, future graduate student or not.

We should teach political science at the undergraduate level in a way that places more emphasis on progression and integration than we typically do. This may require that we trade off some breadth, but I suspect that we will not have to give up much. We should think about undergraduate and graduate education as a singular progression rather than as two relatively distinct activities. This approach does not imply that we must envision identical goals for undergraduate and graduate students. We need not attempt to train professional po-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, we might include a goal of fostering good global citizenship. This can be done without detaching learning at the undergraduate level from the questions, theories, and empirical methods scholars use in their own work.

litical scientists at the undergraduate level.<sup>1</sup> It certainly does not require giving up a commitment to a reasonable degree of conceptual and methodological breadth. Doing this well requires a process, not just for making initial choices about the kind and timing of the information we want to convey, but also for the monitoring of our plans over time. Of course, this will require overcoming some fairly obvious challenges of collective decision-making, which may prove insurmountable in particular cases. A more progressive and integrated undergraduate program, though, will have a large number of benefits, including for the future graduate students that we send out to other departments as well as the graduate students in our own programs.

In response to an external review and some not so subtle prodding from a dean, Emory's [Department of Political Science](#) set about reforming its undergraduate curriculum in 2013. This process, which ultimately took two years, began with a general review of undergraduate programs around the country. Although our program had made particularly strong choices in favor of breadth and depth over integration and progression, it shared a lot in common with many of the programs we reviewed. I will develop my argument in the context of that process. Let me add a few caveats. First, I do not claim to speak for my colleagues. Although there was broad support for the reform among our faculty, there was not consensus, even among the coalition that voted for the reform. Second, I do not claim that we have solved all of the challenges that we confronted, at least from my perspective. It is a work in progress. Third, I will say nothing about what it means to be an effective classroom teacher.<sup>2</sup> My focus is on the curriculum. In what remains, I will first describe the principles of curriculum design that framed our reform. I summarize what we did and highlight the potential benefits of this reform for graduate education. I conclude by identifying several fundamental challenges that remain, which I believe may generalize to other contexts.

### *I. Reforming an Undergraduate Curriculum*

The Emory process was guided by four curriculum design principles: breadth, depth, progression and in-

tegration.<sup>3</sup> Political science is a diverse field. So too is the subfield of comparative politics. Many key questions and ideas motivate our work and our curricula need to reflect that breadth. Yet, we also want students to be given opportunities to deepen their understanding of particular lessons, ideally through guided and ultimately individualized research. In order to ensure that lessons taught are internalized, curricula should be progressive, where core lessons build upon and are reinforced by subsequent lessons. Finally, the curriculum needs to be integrated — ideas taught in one class ought to be used in other classes.

Typical undergraduate curricula in the field surely reflect these principles in many ways. Nearly every department in the country has a variety of courses entitled “Introduction to [Subfield],” which often serve as prerequisites for upper level courses. Students are typically required to take all or nearly all of the main subfield introductions (Comparative Politics, American Politics, International Relations, Political Theory, Public Policy, etc.), ensuring a broad base of knowledge. Departments commonly offer a research methods course that presumably is used in future courses. Departments offer “writing-intensive” research opportunities. The recent undergraduate reform at Stanford, which I will return to in the final section, has resulted in an important variation. Stanford political science majors are introduced to the discipline via a single general course, after which they choose to focus in two of five thematic tracks (including a data science track), which in some ways reflect the traditional subfields, but in other ways reflect an effort to combine and re-imagine the substantive topics that best link courses and content to each other.<sup>4</sup>

A scan of existing undergraduate curricula suggests that each of the design principles is respected in a variety of ways. Programs offer considerable breadth and opportunities for deep learning experiences. What is hard to tell by scanning course plans, however, is whether the progression and integration we have in principle is real in practice. Does “Introduction to Comparative Politics” lead naturally to the questions that are asked in “Comparative Political Behavior” or “The Politics of [Region/Country]?” Are students frequently required to

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<sup>1</sup>I set aside some challenges that might follow adopting a curriculum that cannot be well delivered by the faculty. I assume that since we each largely choose our curricula, this is not a particularly salient problem in the academy.

<sup>2</sup>For a general discussion of these principles, see Meyers and Nulty (2009). For an explicit example of how they are used, the Education Scotland site proves particularly useful (<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/>).

<sup>3</sup>The Stanford major is described at <https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/undergraduate-major/major>. A summary of the program, as well as its motivation, is described in Flaherty (2015).

apply methodological knowledge in substantive classes, and if so, how? When we say that our curricula are progressive and integrated, we have to mean more than that we have introductory courses that are followed by upper level courses, which require as prerequisites the introductory courses. New information actually has to build on core information and ideas actually need to be connected across classes. Not every idea needs to be built upon of course, but some explicit thought should be given to the links.

**What we found.** The Emory undergraduate reform committee found considerable evidence of our faculty creatively managing the potential tensions between breadth and depth. There was a great deal of which to be proud. Our department required undergraduates to take introductory courses in all of our subfields. Students were required to take at least one basic research methods course. We offered a variety of outstanding seminars with limited seating and intense contact with faculty. We provided opportunities to engage the Atlanta community in service-learning courses. We managed a series of high quality study abroad programs. Special writing-intensive courses provided opportunities to develop papers. Our year-long honors program, in which roughly twenty of our best students complete a thesis in close contact with a faculty advisor provided a unique research experience. Not that graduate placement must be a key metric of a program, but our students seeking Ph.D. programs were routinely placed in elite departments (this past year at the University of Chicago and the University of California, San Diego). We seemed to be touching all of the bases.

The opportunities for improvement that we identified became clear as we turned our attention to progression and integration. In order to satisfy distributional requirements, students commonly took introductory courses in their final year, including but certainly not limited to the introductory research methods course. Identical courses were taught quite differently by different instructors. Many students had trouble articulating a clear connection between lower level and upper level courses, as well as expressing confusion over the relevance of any research method for many of their courses. Hours spent learning statistics in R were certainly hard

to explain, but so too were lessons about clear conceptual development, causal mechanisms, and process. Even faculty reported being somewhat uncertain about exactly what was being taught in their colleagues' courses. Only the faculty coordinator for International Studies seemed to have the vaguest sense about what was being taught in foreign universities to our study abroad students.

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**What we did.** The Emory reform made a number of important changes, though it was not radical. A comparison between the old program and the new can be made at the department's website.<sup>5</sup> The primary goal of the reform was to increase progression and integration while maintaining the department's vision of a broad curriculum within which students would have ample opportunities to deepen knowledge. In each subfield, where students once took a single introductory course, they now take an introductory and an intermediate course. In comparative politics, this was created by transforming our typical single semester introductory course into a two course sequence, where both the complexity of topics and level of analysis is increased over time. For example, whereas the first course will introduce foundational work on regimes, the second course will consider how majoritarian and proportional electoral systems influence budgets or how elections are used in authoritarian states. Methods offerings are similarly progressive.<sup>6</sup> Where once we offered a single research course, which combined introductory statistics with broader lessons on research design, we now require a statistics course and a separate course on research design, which is broad with respect to approach and covers topics like ethics and data integrity, which can be glossed over in a single semester class. Students are strongly encouraged to fulfill all introductory requirements early, including the

<sup>5</sup> A comparison of the programs is available here: [http://polisci.emory.edu/home/undergraduate/political\\_science\\_major/](http://polisci.emory.edu/home/undergraduate/political_science_major/).

<sup>6</sup> The major is also linked to Emory's Institute for Quantitative Theory and Methods (QuanTM, <http://quantitative.emory.edu/>). Reflecting the option available to Stanford students, QuanTM majors can focus substantively in political science while pursuing a data science course of study.

methods courses. All instructors are strongly encouraged to use prerequisites.

Integration was advanced by requiring all members of subfields to develop templates for their introductory and intermediate courses together. Faculty assigned to these courses are encouraged to explicitly coordinate content under the general guidelines, perhaps providing additional integration by focusing on a theme for the year, e.g., human migration. Faculty are encouraged to “team-teach” courses when possible. Under the past guidelines, reflecting a push from the College, our curriculum featured a number of writing-intensive courses. We continue to feature these courses, but we now also require that students take “research-intensive” courses in their area of concentration. Further, programs run by members of the department are encouraged to provide a wider number of research opportunities. The [Center for the Study of Law, Politics and Economics \(CSLPE\)](#) now coordinates sixteen undergraduate research fellowships, matching students to faculty-led projects. Importantly, this year we have two undergraduates who have been matched to advanced graduate students, providing research support for dissertation projects.<sup>7</sup> The department continues to support roughly 20 undergraduate honors thesis projects, matching students to faculty advisors.

Having a more effective undergraduate curriculum has a number of implications for our graduate programs. Many of the benefits will naturally accrue to faculty at other schools, the schools at which our undergraduate students ultimately enroll. The following includes an non-exhaustive list of those benefits.

## *II. Implications for Graduate Education*

- **More informed choice:** Assuming that a more effective curriculum improves familiarity with the discipline, the most obvious benefit is that students will be able to make better choices with respect to graduate programs, likely mentors, and program tradeoffs. They will ask better questions and they will be better able to evaluate faculty advice.
- **Better research partners:** Students will also be better prepared to begin contributing as faculty research partners much earlier on. As publication expectations

in graduate school increase, it is essential that our graduate students are given research opportunities as early as possible. When a student spends semesters simply figuring out what political science actually is, it is difficult to ensure that they will be well matched to faculty research projects.

- **Lower attrition:** Attrition rates ought to be lower, especially the cases of attrition that derive from fundamental misperceptions about graduate school itself or a poor understanding of what might be a good match.
- **Better class interaction:** Seminar discussion should be better. Methods faculty would be able to cover more material more quickly and successfully teach at a higher level of abstraction. Critically, this should be true for any methodological approach.

Given faculty incentives to focus on their own graduate students, it is important to recognize that undergraduate reform has benefits for our own programs as well.

- **Learning through teaching:** In so far as graduate students are teaching assistants (instructors in many cases), a more effective undergraduate program will help reinforce the lessons they continue to learn in their own programs. Embedding these students in a progressive and integrated undergraduate program will serve the same purpose for them that it serves for our own undergraduates. This effect should be particularly strong if most programs in the country are still somewhat disconnected from their graduate programs.
- **Research assistance for graduate students:** Linking undergraduates to graduate students via research projects gives graduate students an opportunity to learn how to manage research associates, an important skill as they transition to assistant professorships. And if we pair undergraduate and graduate students on graduate student projects, we provide our graduate students with a level of research assistance that might not be financially feasible otherwise. In a context of high competition and uncertainty over grant dollars for graduate student research, finding creative ways to help promote graduate student productivity is essential.

<sup>7</sup>A description of the CSLPE undergraduate fellow program can be found at <http://polisci.emory.edu/home/cslpe/fellowships.html>.



- **Larger pool of teaching assistants:** A more effective undergraduate program will increase the pool of undergraduate teaching assistants. In some contexts, it will create a pool where none existed before. This will free up opportunities for graduate students to serve as teaching assistants when it is desired or useful rather than required out of a scheduling necessity. Graduate students can be reassigned to teaching assistance or co-instructing where it makes the most sense. And of course they can be reassigned as research assistants.

### III. Remaining Challenges

This section summarizes three remaining challenges that I see. I begin with a feature of many programs, which if reformed would greatly advance a progressive and integrated curriculum without giving up much breadth or depth.

**Political Science 101.** What does it mean to take four introductory courses in four subfields when there is no introduction to the field itself? Reflecting Stanford's experience, the curriculum reform committee first considered developing a single introductory course that would serve as the primary means through which students are introduced to the field of political science. Subfield introductions at an "intermediate" level would follow that course. This did not get very far and that is a real shame.

The failure to have a core course or set of courses in the discipline is a persistent problem. The common structure, where multiple subfield courses structure a student's introduction to the discipline, implies that the field is just the sum of distinct components found in the individual subfields. It also means that students spend four semesters being "introduced" to political science. For a variety of reasons and for a number of students, this introduction continues into the senior year. Students do not need four semesters to learn the basic lessons of political science. There are very good reasons for subfields to continue to structure much of the work that we do (Reiter, 2015), but among these good reasons is not that the subfields have nothing in common. That is simply wrong. The fields have core motivating problems in common. They rely on similar techniques of research design. They speak to similar normative concerns. Putting students through at least four separate semesters in pursuit of these basic lessons is a massive waste of time and resources. This is not to say that all foundational information about comparative politics could be placed in Political Science 101; however, excluded informa-

tion could easily be covered in an intermediate subfield course, sensibly building upon or connecting to earlier lessons. This structure would lead naturally to upper level courses that continue to build on, and yet are linked to, upper level courses in other subfields. Breadth of study would be maintained while adding progression and integration.

The obvious practical problem would seem to be that faculties have to agree on a common set of "core topics" for the introductory course. That will be challenging in some cases, probably not so much because it is hard to find big ideas in common in principle, but because of a lack of trust and concerns about the implications of making content choices. In some groups, perhaps, it will be impossible. Still, I am generally optimistic, especially if we continue to allow for a major role for the subfields (or whatever salient groups there happen to be in a department). The goal is to find the topics and ideas that we share, so that future courses in our subfield can build on those ideas. As long as the subfields have many ideas in common, which I am certain that they do, this kind of process would not require considerable compromise. It might even be fun!

**Managing Tensions Among Principles.** The deepest challenges follow from tensions among the four principles of an effective curriculum. Our efforts to ensure that courses are integrated and progressive must be reconciled with a competing desire for breadth and depth. When faced with this problem, the Emory reform committee simply chose to leave an element of the curriculum alone. Although our introductory, intermediate, and methods courses are new, upper level courses were untouched. In a diverse field, people will naturally disagree about what to emphasize in those courses. Even if we can agree on what to highlight in the introductory or intermediate courses, higher level courses will ultimately reflect the particular interests of faculty; and, without a strategy for linking these courses, we cannot expect complete integration. Pushing hard for complete integration might actually risk undermining academic freedom too much. Political science may be too diverse for it ever to support the kind of integration that would maximize learning.

Managing tradeoffs across the four principles requires thinking about curriculum reform as an ongoing process. Some curricular changes that are not possible today may be possible in the future. It takes time to learn