

Teaching Statement

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My teaching philosophy is grounded in two simple ideas. First, I want to help students gain the substantive knowledge associated with a particular course. Second, I want to enable students to grow by developing a strong sense of themselves as individuals, a sense of themselves in a community, and of sense of themselves in society at large. Every teacher and professor should share the first of these goals, but I believe my additional emphasis on the second point sets me apart and largely shapes my approach to teaching. The conviction I feel toward the latter is largely attributable to my own undergraduate liberal arts education where it became clear to me that a professor's role is not only to disseminate information but also to help students grow into adulthood. Given that the overwhelming majority of college students are in their late teenage years and early twenties' and that this time period is such a pivotal moment in developing a sense of self and of community, the opportunities to provide a positive influence are nearly limitless. I focus on a number of methods to accomplish these broader goals, and I discuss them in detail below. Briefly, though, I think it is absolutely crucial to encourage students to think critically and scientifically about politics, to engage and evaluate students in multiple ways, to develop skills that will serve the students outside of the classroom, and to be more than a lecturer to the students.

A colleague tells the story of describing to a student the difference between a history course and a political science course—international relations in particular—as follows. An historian might seek to record and know the important events, details, and nuances that preceded the outbreak of World War I. As political scientists, though, we want to answer broader questions like why wars occur at all. That is, as political scientists we strive to explain any number of events, occurrences, and behavior that can be categorized under the broad term “politics,” and to do so in a generalizable manner that advances our understanding of our particular subject. I try to encourage a similar approach among my students, which involves teaching them to ask questions about what interests them, proposing answers or explanations to their questions, and ultimately evaluating those same answers. Just as important to thinking about politics in this manner, however, is learning how to critically assess what others have to say about it. I stress with my students the need to identify arguments, and, more importantly, the assumptions and biases that are associated with them so that they can analyze the points being made and relate them to broader discussions.

On that point, I believe that discussion is a central component of a valuable classroom experience. While some material might best be presented in a standard lecture format, on the first day I make it clear to all of my classes that they will be responsible for working through at least some of the material with me and their fellow classmates in an open dialogue. How I foster this discussion varies both by the subject matter of a particular class and the academic level of the class, but I make sure that every one of my classes has multiple opportunities to engage with me, the material, and their classmates. We know that students learn in a variety of ways, and classroom discussion provides one excellent chance for me to gauge how well students understand material as well as apply narrow lessons from reading to broader concepts.

Beyond discussion, though, there are a number of other techniques I use in class to help students relate to my lessons. Even if I am going to be lecturing for a full class period, I try to have at least one video clip or small group exercise that grabs students' interest and breaks up my lecture. Other times, I will spend a significant portion of class using a game or exercise that relates to the

material for the day. For instance, in my International Organization class this past summer I employed a variation on Paper, Rock, Scissors where the students can challenge one another to duels, with the only object of the game being survival. Every student starts the game with a playing card, loses it when they lose a duel, and cannot refuse a challenge once it has been made. The students can get another card from me as long as I have some remaining in the deck. Given the goal of the game, which is made clear to the students, everyone should sit down and refuse to challenge any of their classmates—everyone would “win.” Invariably, however, this does not happen and before long there is a line of students waiting to receive a new card. As I run out of cards I stop the last few students from challenging each other and simply ask them what the goal of the game is. When they eventually remember, I stop the game and we discuss Thomas Hobbes, the human condition, and how it relates to the possibility for cooperation.

I also try to run a simulation in every class. I relate multiple assignments to the simulation over the course of the semester to help students prepare for it, which has the benefits of ensuring that they are prepared and also provides an avenue for assessment outside of exams. In the classes where I have run a simulation over multiple days, I have yet to have students tell me that they did not find it a fun and useful way to engage with what they have been learning for a semester. In fact, I feel that students gain so much from well-designed and well-implemented simulations that along with a fellow graduate student, Casey Delehanty, I designed a simulation that can be used in either Comparative Politics or International Relations courses, which is currently under review for publication. Combining simulations with classroom discussion, in-class exercises, and classroom lectures helps ensure that students get the most possible out of the class experience.

As important as it is to provide the best possible learning environment in the classroom, I also recognize that much of what we do extends beyond those walls. I know that five years after one of my classes students are not likely to remember the holding from a case we went over in an American Constitutional Law class or how voting shares are allotted in the International Monetary Fund. It is therefore incumbent on those who educate to help students develop skills that will help them succeed after college. In that regard the most important tool that we can help students master is the ability to communicate effectively both in their writing and their speaking. Political science major or not, future graduate student or not, the one skill that every person will need in their lives is the ability to think clearly and logically about a question or topic and be able to communicate information to other people. This is another reason why discussion is such a central element of my classes and why every class has multiple written assignments. I always hope students leave my class with substantive knowledge of a course, but I always tell them that they will leave my class as a better writer and communicator.

Related to that point, but from a broader perspective, it is important to mention what I believe to be a university’s mission and a professor’s role within that. Just like substantive knowledge in one of my courses is an important goal but is secondary to building practical skills that are useful after school, I see a university’s larger mission as developing leaders, scholars, thinkers, and, ultimately, individuals with a sense of community. If a student graduates having mastered the material from every course but is not prepared to capitalize on opportunities to put that knowledge to use in his or her community, then we have failed that student to some degree. Relevant communities will necessarily vary by individual, but we should be developing students who are capable and eager to engage with others in their neighborhoods, towns, states, and with people from around the world. I do not think it is at all trite or naïve to expect great things from students, and it

is our responsibility to help students develop a sense of self and others that will enable them to achieve just that.

Instructors who spend only a few hours with students in a classroom every week cannot accomplish such a mission. I make it a point to be as available to my students as can be reasonably expected. Beyond standard office hours, this means having an open door policy much of the time. In fact, given my legal background I have been able to advise students on how to prepare for and what to expect from law school or graduate school in general. Moreover, other graduate students have sent their own students to me for similar discussions. This type of mentoring relationship is an important complement to effective classroom instruction, but must also be incorporated with other activities to achieve that broader mission I described above. Drawing on my own undergraduate experience again, professors frequently attended campus events, whether it was sporting events, student performances, or guest lectures. Moreover, especially in my freshman year, professors often invited the entire class over for dinner once a semester. This type of interaction helped students identify a professor as someone other than the person who recites lectures and assigns grades. It also helps provide that sense of community that I feel is so important to develop with and for students.

Admittedly, I am at a very early stage in what I plan to be a long career, but even so some of my own expectations and ideas have already been changed by my limited experience. This, of course, is a natural result of a process that should continue throughout my career. An effective teacher is one who never stops learning and refining the methods used to educate students. That said, even as I learn and adapt over time I will always try to keep in mind the important goals of enabling students to succeed in both the classroom and beyond it.