

APSA Teaching and Learning Conference

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Besides our peer-reviewed journal (*Journal of Political Science Education*) which publishes political science work on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, I believe our best work in education is found in our annual Teaching and Learning Conference sponsored by the American Political Science Association. This conference was established in 2004 and has met annually. Following a working group model, about 250-300 professors and graduate students gather in groups of 15-25 focused on a particular approach to the discipline (e.g., internationalizing the curriculum), a pedagogical technique (simulations), a significant movement in higher education (e.g., assessment), or a specific group of political scientists (e.g., graduate or community college faculty). These groups then meet throughout a two and a half day period, where individuals present papers and ideas and the working group discusses them—not presentation by presentation as in a traditional research conference—but conceptually. Each group is led by a skilled moderator who helps the group move toward larger conceptions, goals and action items which are later published in one of the three major APSA journals.

Throughout this conference there are scheduled networking receptions, organized lunches with discussion tables, and workshops which participants may select from a menu to attend. The APSA has a social networking site that allows each working group to communicate not only before conferences, but also afterwards. Projects have evolved from this conference; for instance, APSA has now established a new publication series of edited books on teaching and learning topics (i.e., *Assessing the Political Science Department*, *Civic Engagement*, *Internship Handbook for Undergraduates*). These books came from connections made at the conference and research initiated and developed there. The quality of the work presented has increased over the years as has the broadness of the participation. It has been particularly successful at drawing faculty from more teaching-oriented institutions back into the American Political Science Association, which had been perceived as a research-focused organization. This conference has also helped change our discipline by being a visible and constant reminder of the teaching portion of our work; for instance, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is now listed as an official research interest that can be identified by members of the Association. You can see more information on this conference at: https://www.apsanet.org/content_31632.cfm?navID=206

One of my personal goals has been to establish a pre-conference workshop at each of the major conferences of the APSA that focuses on helping faculty who teach introductory courses update their knowledge of the relevant subfields covered in these courses. One of the constant concerns I have heard from faculty (at both two-year and four-year institutions) is in regards to the teaching of the traditional introductory courses (e.g., Comparative Politics and U.S. Government). Five to ten years after graduate school we are immersed in our substantive research fields and work to stay up-to-date in the courses in which we teach our majors or in graduate courses, but often we lose touch with the other fields we cover in the survey courses. Based on a recommendation from a community college colleague, I have proposed the APSA Committee on Teaching and Learning sponsor two annual short courses at APSA in which experts in the field present a half-day course on the current status of the literature in the field, appropriate for faculty teaching the survey courses. Our goal would be for the participants to be exposed to the most recent theory, consensus, resources, and models that would be appropriate for the survey classes.

The preliminary response to this idea has been very strong from faculty representing a wide variety of institutions and subfields. We had hoped to debut our first workshop (Teaching the Middle East) at the annual conference in New Orleans this summer, but it was cancelled. For the comparative course, I hope to focus on a different region of the world or a specific country each year and for the U.S. Government course a different key topic (presidency, Congress, elections, political behavior, etc.). There have been three barriers to implementation. First, it was very difficult to get section chairs to see the potential of this workshop (for example, visibility of their members, additional membership for their section, evidence of commitment to teaching). These chairs change annually, so it will be hard to institutionalize such a program, but it does mean we can repeatedly make the same request to the same sections and get different answers. For instance, I tried to get the chair of the "Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior" section to help us arrange a short course on teaching elections (the semester of the general election!!) and received minimal interest or help. Second, while there is excitement in offering this short course on the part of the decision makers, it has been hard to find people willing to help work to implement it, including the APSA. There is lot of enthusiasm for the idea, but there is no reward for people who do the work to present the material (except for textbook authors and that raises different problems). Finally, while we had 28 people sign up for the short course, "Teaching the Middle East," that was cancelled when the conference was cancelled, they were mostly graduate students. There was no representation from the community colleges and teaching faculty for whom it was designed. I communicated to the members of the "Teaching Political Science" section, but the next time I may have to send letters to all of the political science departments in these institutions that are within a two hour drive of the conference. The logistics of identifying these professors is difficult in light of how many smaller institutions present faculty on their websites. It is a great idea, but it will take many tries to implement it well.