Teaching Philosophy
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My philosophy and approach to teaching involves two ideas: accessibility and engagement. Because Political Science often involves the intersection of intense, consequential, or frightening real-world events and academic research that is often inaccessible to students, I work to create a safe, inclusive, and flexible learning environment for students.

Accessibility

I have devoted much of my early career to building accessible courses, because success is impossible if the course's structure does not allow students to engage easily. Today, our students come from highly diverse personal, professional, and societal backgrounds. Sam Houston State itself is a Hispanic Serving Institution, a majority non-white campus, and has many non-traditional students. Many are also from the Houston area—one of the poorest urban areas in the United States. This means that our students lead complicated lives outside of class. I believe that instructors have a duty to adjust to these conditions and my courses are designed to be as accessible as possible.

In my experience as an instructor, the costs of course materials significantly hinder student success. My courses rely entirely on open-source textbooks and resources, OpenStax for example, scanned samples, or electronic documents available from the university library. I also avoid requiring technologies, such as test observation software, that require expensive computers and high-speed internet, instead opting for exams and assignments that allow for formative feedback and reinforce essential research and critical thinking skills.

The same philosophy extends to medical accessibility—physical or mental. I do not believe that students should be forced to keep up with class while they are out for medical reasons. I do not require doctor's notes since a large quantity of my students do not have stable access to healthcare and health providers do not always provide notes. Students managing chronic conditions or mental health will also not always be able to access medical care.

My students are given the time to recover. We then meet on an individual basis to work out a plan to catch up. Additionally, exam and project deadlines are bounded so that graded events have some built-in flexibility. This only takes slightly more effort on my part, and I find it relieves a lot of student tension once they know they will be able to learn and succeed in the course regardless of what happens outside of it. It also significantly reduces end-of semester panic surrounding grades and results in superior work from students.

To further aid with accessibility, I provide copies of my slides, notes, and copies of white boards or in class projects for review on the course management system—typically Blackboard. These are formatted so that those with reading and learning disabilities can easily use their own accessibility tools such as screen readers, and I allow students to record or type notes if they desire.

While the COVID-19 pandemic required some radical adjustments to teaching, my focus on accessibility predates the pandemic. In response to COVID-19 itself, I have restructured all my courses so that they can seamlessly transition online and so that students who are sick can complete work after they recover for full credit.

Engagement

As an educator responsible for passing on knowledge and providing tools to think critically about political problems, it my responsibility to make complex topics accessible and engaging. I rely heavily on active learning techniques in the classroom. Between 2018 and 2020 I completed training in active learning courses from the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning's Mobile Summer Institute and a year-long Effective Teaching Practices fellowship for the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE).

I consistently use small group discussions, peer-discussions, multiple drafting of assignments, practice assignments, and in-class feedback to walk students through content. These techniques bring student participation into the classroom, where they can engage with the content on their own, receive necessary instruction from me, and develop the critical reading, arguing, and writing skills they will need outside the classroom. All graded coursework is focused on formative activities and assessment, which allows students to make and observe their own constant progress as they master the material.

I also ensure that syllabi include perspectives and scholarship from marginalized communities. It important to engage students by showing them work from scholars who represent their communities. This is also essential for providing a complete representation of our field's knowledge—or where that knowledge is lacking. In my International Relations courses especially, this type of engagement focuses further addressing, examining, and correcting the role of colonialism and racism in the development of the field and the biases it "built in" to the field.

Lastly, engagement requires developing critical thinking. These skills are the most important that Political Science students can develop, both for their future careers and personal lives. I introduce students to the scientific study of politics early, and structure discussions and assignments so that they are always evaluating and extending the ideas and theories under consideration. Combined with multi-draft writing assignments in advanced courses, all my students learn to engage with the world as social scientists, to ask and answer questions critically, and to protect themselves from misinformation.

To conclude, I believe that accessibility and engagement are critical successful higher education. Accessibility is vital to ensure that all students can engage with the course. Engagement encourages students to develop the knowledge and critical thinking skills that are essential to their lives in a politically charged and technologically complex world.