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Teaching Statement

Teaching has a central role in my scholarly life. I am committed to the development of students' ability to learn and think. Political science is a discipline that is particularly fruitful for fostering these skills. While I believe that students taking courses in political science should attain a familiarity with key concepts from the discipline, the subject is ideal for developing a life-long interest in learning and a greater capacity to think analytically.

There are, I believe, two fundamentally important aspects to effectively conveying to students the ideas in political science. First, instructors must have an intimate understanding of the research in the field. Because of this, engaging in research compliments one's ability to teach. In fact, some of the most effective teachers I have observed are active scholars. These individuals are particularly well-suited to speak about the developments in the study of politics, and convey the many different perspectives that surround the questions in our discipline. Speaking personally, I am especially excited about teaching courses that are related to my research.

However, simply being close to field does not ensure success in the classroom. In order to be effective, teachers must be able to convey ideas in a manner that is accessible to students. This requires teachers to be flexible in adjusting their methods to different levels and learning styles. In the first course I taught, I felt that I would best serve my students by explaining in lecture as many concepts as possible. I believed incorrectly that this was an efficient way of introducing students to a variety of different perspectives that would provide them with an arsenal of ideas to apply in their work. I soon discovered that students simply recited the information hand-fed to them and demonstrated no ability to apply these concepts. In exams, essay questions that had intended to spur independent thought were simply answered with definitions taken verbatim from lectures. In effect, my teaching methods were not instilling in students a true understanding of these ideas.

After seeking the advice of a faculty member whose teaching is exemplary and reading some literature on teaching techniques, I modified my approach to teaching so as to increase student involvement in the learning process. Specifically, in larger classes, I adopted a more Socratic method with the goal of steering students to uncovering the ideas. I have found, particularly in introductory courses, that students best understand concepts when they are able to derive them from anecdotes or participation in simulations. In smaller classes, I use a more interactive approach that encourages classroom discussion. In the more intimate setting of small classes, I make extensive use of leading questions that prompt students to interact with one another in a collective effort to ascertain answers. These tools encourage students to discover generalizable concepts independently. After having altered my approach to teaching, I have noticed a marked improvement in students' enthusiasm for the courses and their ability to express and use key concepts. In turn, my passion for teaching has continued to grow.

Perhaps the most important component of teaching is guiding students to more analytical thought. When teaching a course in political science, I understand that the majority of students are likely to pursue careers outside the discipline. Therefore, I think it is important that they not merely learn concepts specific to the field but also develop a greater capacity to think critically – a skill applicable in other areas in life.

I was fortunate to have studied with several professors that pushed their students to critically evaluate their environment and to search for answers by scientific reasoning. I follow their lead.

In my efforts to foster analytical thinking, I engage students in questioning the assumptions that are fundamental to the theories discussed. In addition, I encourage students to explore ways to test these theories in a scientifically rigorous manner. A truly rewarding experience for me has been working with students as they conduct research projects for my classes. In each of the classes I have taught, students are asked to engage in research projects that evaluate some component or application of a theory discussed in the course. This involves deriving hypotheses from the theories and developing a research design that is suitable to addressing the question. I believe that these projects are an extremely effective tool for developing analytical thinking in students by cultivating a greater understanding of scientific inquiry.

Guiding students to developing these skills is not a job confined to the classroom. A teacher dedicated to student learning must also be willing to engage in activities such as advising and individual instruction. An individual that is truly committed to the success of students works to further students' ability to think independently even when he or she has no obligation to do so. I have had the good fortune of working with advisors that are willing to go above and beyond to assist in my learning process. I can attest to the value of such dedication. I also witnessed this when I assisted in teaching the senior honors thesis seminar at Washington University. Many faculty members serve as advisors to these students as they embark on writing theses in political science. While these faculty members are not required to assist in this process, it is through their guidance that I saw students flourish.

There are several courses that I would like to teach within the subfields of American politics and political methodology. I have already taught, and would like to continue teaching, a course on U.S. congressional politics, an introductory course in American politics, and an introductory course in Quantitative Political Methodology. I would like to expand upon this by offering courses on the American political party system, U.S. elections, the presidency, interest groups, and public policy. Moreover, I would like to teach these courses at all levels. I would also like to offer a wider range of courses in political methodology, including a course on linear models and an applied course on maximum likelihood estimation.

Teaching is a unique opportunity to both instill knowledge and cultivate analytical thinking. Neither task is a simple one, nor are they mutually exclusive. To ensure that these goals are met, teachers must be willing to critically evaluate their performance, and be willing to adjust their methods to meet the specific needs of their students. Moreover, teachers dedicated to student development must look beyond the classroom to foster a successful learning environment.