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A Demographic Shift in College Students: A Preparatory Guide for Political Scientists and the Discipline

John R. Hermann

Abstract

As United States higher education moves from the gilded age to a more challenging one, this research examines how the changing demographics of American college students should influence how political science faculty teach their classes. With more first-generation, underrepresented students (FGUS) on college campuses, the study offers five best practices to improve student success for political science faculty. Additionally, the research proposes that the content in political science courses should reflect the changing demographics of our students – both in revising our existing courses and offering new ones. Finally, diversification of faculty in political science is vital when teaching students of underrepresented groups.

Keywords: trends in higher education, pedagogy, student demographic changes, political science, student learning outcomes

1. Introduction

Several scholars have examined the history of our discipline and the appropriate areas of inquiry for political scientists -- whether it is organized empirical research programs, behavioralism, neo-institutionalism, formal modeling, historical, inductive, deductive, mathematical, or economic methods (e.g., [1–3]). As social scientists, we relish asking questions related to how the social and political world works. In particular, political scientists teach and research “the constrained use of [social] power” ([2], p. 7). Or, as Laswell famously articulates that “politics” is “who gets what, when, and how” ([2], p. 8).

Less scholarly attention is devoted to the types of students we teach and mentor (but, see ref. [4]). Yet, it is as important as the research questions we ask. Like the evolution of our discipline, the types of students interested in political science change over time. Higher education in the United States is entering a transformative period. Our classes will be filled with more first-generation, underrepresented students (FGUS) than in the past. This study seeks to examine those changes among the students we teach and mentor. More precisely, this study asks two central questions: First, how will the changing demographics of American college students influence how political scientists should teach their classes? And, second, what pedagogical strategies can we use to ensure that our students succeed in political science classes?

This article is divided into four sections. The first section explores the demographic, economic, and cultural changes underway in higher education. This section also justifies the importance of a college education by demonstrating its tangible and intangible benefits. It also examines how these changes will influence political scientists and our majors. The second section offers five best (pedagogical) practices to ensure our students succeed and majors thrive. The third section examines how the demographic shift should alter the subject matter we teach in our classes. It also explores the benefits of diversifying our profession to help our understanding of the discipline and to mentor our undergraduate and graduate students. The fourth section summarizes the major recommendations of this study and offers two immediate solutions.

2. The times are A-Changin'

A sea change is underway in higher education. Demographic, economic, and cultural factors [5] are altering the landscape of students applying to college. Using county-level data for each state, The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) can predict eighteen years in advance what the college applicant pool will potentially look like. WICHE currently forecasts a marked decrease in the number of White students applying to college – a 17 percent decline from public and 26 percent from private high schools in the next fifteen years. As WICHE “Data Insights” concludes, “The decreasing number of White high school graduates will be counterbalanced over the next decade by a swift growth in the number of Hispanic graduates, in particular, and Asian/Pacific Islanders ([6], p. 2). In the next decade, Hispanic high school students applying to college are projected to increase by almost 50 percent. Similarly, in the next fifteen years, there will be an expected increase of 30 percent among Asian/Pacific Islanders ([6], p. 2). Equally important, many of the students applying to college will be first-generation and/or PELL-grant students (representing all races).

The students on a college campus in the near future will look very different than those in the past (i.e., after the codification of the GI Bill in 1944 and the Higher Education Act of 1965). While the types of students applying to college will differ, there is one constant: “College is the bridge between potential and opportunity” ([5], p. XII). McGee reaffirms that a college education affords “greater job opportunities, more employment security, and higher immediate and lifetime earnings” ([5], p. 85). Additionally, virtually all liberal arts educators tout the intangible benefits of a college education, including living a fuller life, having better physical and mental health, solving problems, communicating clearly (both orally and in writing), working in teams, and being more introspective ([7], pp. 1–4). Other benefits of a college education include having “greater intellectual, artistic, and critical thinking skills, civic mindedness, marital stability, self-esteem, more successful children, greater ethnic and gender tolerance ... than their non-college counterparts” [8].

Based on the tangible and intangible benefits of a college education, universities have a high-stakes responsibility not only to educate students. They must also prepare students for their academic, career, and life goals. For those students who express an interest in political science, we cannot assume that all students entering college are prepared. As Nunn ([9], pp. 2-3) points out:

It's important to remember that what looks like intellectual talent is likely the product of excellent academic preparation from high school and earlier ... A great number of U.S. high school schools do not adequately prepare students for the demands of college academics. At average and low-performing high

schools – the kinds of schools where many first-generation college students are likely to have attended – academic success is rooted in completing busywork assignments such as copying notes from the board and memorization without critical thinking.

As we teach our classes, we tend to use the same lectures, the same books, articles, and other sources, and the same teaching tools and tricks we observed in college and graduate school and learned as early-career faculty members. Yet, the students are not the same.

Current and future students see the world from a different perspective than during our formative years in higher education. While ultimately students must take ownership for their success, political scientists must also properly prepare students for the rigors of college. As educators, we must adapt to the changing demographic, cultural, and social forces. Otherwise, our expectation that we will have a captive audience when we teach may not be the case. There are certain best pedagogical practices that lead to academic student success.

3. Best pedagogical practices

As graduate students, our education is largely devoted to mastering knowledge of our discipline and undertaking and completing novel research. Still, as part of the academy, we recognize that an integral part of our job is teaching. If we are lucky enough to secure a tenure-track position, we know that one of the most important aspects of earning tenure is our ability to teach effectively. Yet, little time in our graduate training is devoted to working with students. Ironically, although “teaching is often considered to be a distant cousin of the ‘real’ work of a ‘true’ political scientist, especially at research institutions, the greatest exposure that the largest number of people have to political science is not through research, but through teaching” ([4], p. 10). Furthermore, it is through teaching that “directly affects who chooses to become a political scientist” ([4], p. 10).

If teaching is truly important, why do graduate schools devote such little time to it? Many early-career faculty members learn to teach on the job. When we teach, we are sharing our mastery of the material and discussing the important debates in our field. In this sense, we are sharing knowledge with our students. Yet, for students to be successful, conscientious faculty members eventually learn that there is a fundamental difference between teaching and pedagogy. Teaching involves sharing information, while pedagogy focuses on how students learn -- higher-order learning, writing, researching, and developing strong oratory skills ([10], p. 2). The faculty member’s knowledge of the material is just the start in becoming an effective teacher. Teaching students how to learn is as important --if not more – than sharing knowledge. Graduate schools would be doing a great service to devote more time to teaching their students pedagogy.

With the changing demographics of students, faculty members are likely to encounter more students who do not have the adequate preparation for college in their K-12 programs. In many high schools, students succeed by memorizing concepts. In college, however, we expect our students to develop higher-order learning skills (e.g., the ability to apply an abstract or complex theory to novel situations). Many students feel like a deer caught in the headlights. As Nunn [9] points out, “Frustration and resentment build when students do not understand why in the world an instructor requires something that is unfamiliar to them.”

There are (at least) five strategies that faculty members can use to help students succeed in political science classes:

1. Transparency in our expectations and offering pedagogical rationales in our classes;
2. Student-learning outcomes listed on the syllabus;
3. “Early alerts” with low stakes assignments in the early part of the semester;
4. Midterm grades with explicit feedback; and,
5. An understanding of the academic support system at our institution.

First, transparency in our expectations and offering pedagogical rationales in our classes help the student understand what the faculty member is trying to achieve. It also helps the faculty member know that the student understands the expectations of the course. For example, a faculty member should explain why she believes a theory is important, what it means to the student, and how the student can apply the theory to her understanding of society. Some faculty members may believe this is “babying” the student ([9], p. 16). There are distinct benefits for the student to struggle and feel uncomfortable in the learning process. Bjork and Bjork [11] call this idea “desired difficulties.” There is a substantial difference, however, in helping the student understand the significance of what the faculty member is teaching and providing the “desired difficulty” in applying the concept to other situations, that is, the learning process. A student should not have to read the “tea leaves” regarding what the instructor expects. Instead, let the student develop critical reasoning skills based on the knowledge shared by the faculty member to help the student succeed in her academic, career, and life goals. Transparency in our expectations and offering pedagogical justification should be outlined on the syllabus with reminders in class at key times in the semester.

Second, every syllabus should have student-learning outcomes (SLO’s) – specific, “well defined goals related to an issue of substance and depth, expected to lead to observable results” ([12], p. 49). Virtually all syllabi clearly explain the course material, the graded work, and sources consulted in class (i.e., learning objectives). Providing student-learning outcomes can offer a learning road map of the expectations for the class. Specific skills learned and why they are valuable will help the student learn and professor teach. For example, if there is a paper in the class, the faculty member can explain specific skills a student will learn writing the paper. A student-learning outcome can be as simple as a student demonstrating she knows how to create a clear and succinct central claim. The faculty member can also show a good example of a central claim (and what it is not). Student-learning outcomes can also be used as a measurement tool for assessing the student’s growth in the class. It holds both the faculty member and student accountable regarding the skills learned in class.

Third, low stakes assignments early in the semester with “early alerts” (no later than the fifth week of class in the semester system) to notify the student any areas where she needs improvement is a best practice. It can also be the difference between success and failure in the class. There is scholarly consensus (e.g., ref. [13], pp. 55, 57; [7], p. 103) that notifying students of deficiencies after midterms may be too late. Students, moreover, may need explicit feedback from their professors earlier in the semester; they may need help interpreting or reacting to instructor feedback with help-seeking behaviors that support student learning. Nunn [9] for example, gives a mini-midterm the second week of class to help the students know what to expect in her introductory Sociology course. Alternatively, a professor could offer a short reflection paper on the early readings. Explicit feedback with a grade

can help students understand what is expected in a professor's classes, what the student is doing correctly, and where the student needs improvement. Any student with a grade of a C- or below should be encouraged to visit the faculty member during her office hours with strategies on how to improve.

Directly related to early alerts, the fourth strategy offers a more detailed form of midterm grades. At many universities, students will receive a midterm grade at the midpoint (or slightly after) in the semester. While some universities issue midterm grades if a student is only in danger of failing, others also provide grades for students performing well in the class. Still, the student's knowledge of the grade at a specific point in time is not that helpful if she does not understand why. The grade with a rationale behind it is much more likely to help the student succeed in the latter part of the semester. Starfish and EAB, for example, are software packages many universities use to help the student understand where she stands in class and why. In my university's Summer Bridge First-Year Experience, which is exclusively reserved for FGUS, two faculty members who co-taught together met with each student individually after the student received her midterm grade. They discussed what the student was doing well, how she could improve, and what help-seeking strategies the student could engage in to remedy any issues. After the meeting, the student had one week to respond by email to reflect on the discussion. According to the faculty members and students in the class, it was the meaningful dialog that led to greater student success in that particular class as well as other classes the students were taking that semester.

And, fifth, political science (and all) faculty's knowledge of academic support resources is a vital strategy to ensure student success. Understanding our limitations as educators is central to the success of our students. After all, we do not have expertise in disability services and financial aid, as academic coaches (e.g., cramming vs. chunking), counselors, or in career services. We still have a responsibility to understand the academic support resource offerings at our institution and recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach for our students does not work. As faculty members with an interest in student success, we should refer our students to the appropriate academic support resource office. If it is online, we should forward the link to our students. If not, keep a list of the resources available and the person's name, office, phone number, and email for each office.

The five strategies discussed here are not exhaustive. Yet, they offer a strong start in the student's academic success in our political science classes. There are also strategies that are directly related to the content of our political science courses and who teaches them that will benefit our students.

4. Content changes in our courses and diversification of the profession

Political science, like all areas of inquiry (e.g., biology, chemistry, economics, and sociology), evolves. The content of political science is likely to change based on external factors. Global ecological limits (e.g., ref. [14]), cyber [15] and bio-warfare [16], the linkage between genetics and politics [17], and terrorism [18] are just a sampling of topics that are fruitful for future political science research. Existing subjects in all sub-disciplines of political science will also need to be altered to account for the changing demographics of our students.

If the study of political science is about the "constrained use of [social] power" or "who gets what, when, and how," FGUS of Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islanders origins will see the world differently than when we were trained as undergraduates and graduate students. We should not try "to make first-generation students become more like their continuing generation counterparts" ([9], p. 5). Instead,

we should revise our classes to consider the political culture and struggles underrepresented students have experienced. Put simply, we have to know our audience.

Political science should have a “better understanding of how changing demographics affect the contours of group identities and cleavage formations that structure many contemporary policy debates” ([4], p. 7). Latinx, the group that will experience the greatest growth in the near future, are interested in the political world and what it means to them. Of all the social sciences, “Latinos have the highest concentration of political science majors at 44.8 percent” ([4], p. 30). Additionally, Asian/Pacific Islanders choose to major in political science (32.3 percent) only after economics (35.2 percent among the social sciences) ([4], p. 30). It is in our courses that political science professors can show the importance of understanding the students’ role as informed and educated citizens. As Fraga et al. ([4], p. 38) notes, “The classroom is, perhaps, the arena in which political science has the greatest opportunity to demonstrate what it can contribute to make all citizens and residents more informed participants in defining their futures.” It makes sense not only to create separate courses that explore these underrepresented groups. It is also prudent to discuss the role of these minorities in our existing courses.

The same theoretical justification exists for diversifying our profession. As Fraga et al. correctly point out, “The overwhelming majority of political scientists are Caucasians, even among women” ([4], p. 42). Faculty members from diverse backgrounds have different experiences than the dominant culture of our discipline. Fraga et al. also reaffirms this notion by stating that, “The presumption that a group of individuals of mostly the same background across all these parameters can comprehensively study the politics of those positionalities is deeply flawed and can limit the accuracy and relevance of the resulting work” ([4], p. 13). While it starts in the undergraduate classroom, graduate schools must also actively recruit students that belong to marginalized groups. And, departments that hire minority candidates must offer a warm and welcome environment.

Unfortunately, it has been a challenge for political science to diversify the profession. In discussing the discipline, Jaschik ([19], p. 2) states that it “should be of concern in a world in which white men do not constitute the sole demographic ... [and] who does the research and what that research constitutes.” A contributing factor to hindering diversification efforts is that faculty of underrepresented backgrounds do not experience a positive work climate. Jayakumaret et al. [20] laments “that 75 percent of faculty of underrepresented backgrounds identified their campus climates as moderate to highly negative.” Feelings of high racial hostility and isolation are common for faculty of underrepresented backgrounds ([4], pp. 47–48). Sadly, underrepresented faculty “frequently pay a sort of cultural or race tax in the form of being asked to serve on committees largely because of their race, ethnicity, and intersection of gender.” While these issues are endemic on university campuses, it does not mean that political scientists cannot actively work to make their own departments more hospitable for underrepresented faculty. Mentoring underrepresented faculty is essential to retention. And, when possible, political scientists should advocate university wide for the importance of retaining underrepresented faculty. Otherwise, leaky pipeline issues will become the norm.

5. Discussion

As United States higher education moves from the gilded age to a more challenging one, this research examines how the changing demographics of American college students should influence how political science faculty teach their classes.

With more FGUS on college campuses, the study offered five best practices to improve student success:

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Additionally, the research proposes that the content in political science courses reflect the changing demographics of our students – both in revising our existing courses and offering new ones. Finally, diversification of faculty in political science is vital to include those of underrepresented groups.

Many of the recommendations in this analysis require long-term solutions. There are some strategies that can be done proactively to accommodate these major changes in student demography. Political science departments can create consortiums among their peer and aspirant institutions to discuss what the changing demography means to them. Departments can also figure out ways to help underrepresented students in their classes succeed, how the content in their courses can change, and how to retain underrepresented faculty.

Political science departments can learn more about the overall trends in higher education, since it will directly affect them. Faculty members are frequently on the front line in helping students. Departments can offer shared readings on the state of higher education and strategies in helping student success. A great start on the changes underway in higher education is Jon McGee’s [5] *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education*. To understand the new demographics of students, two good sources are Lisa M. Nunn’s [9] *33 Simple Strategies for Faculty: A Week-by-Week Resource for Teaching First-Year and First-Generation Students* and Kathleen Cushman’s [21] *First in the Family: Advice about College from First-Generation Students*.

With challenges comes opportunity. An education offers a great opportunity for FGUS. Political science faculty can be at the forefront of accommodating the new demographic changes among our students. Pope [22] finds that student engagement is the best predictor of student success in college, which includes students having meaningful interactions with faculty. It will require resolve and vigilance by faculty to engage students of differing backgrounds. More challenging for faculty will be the cultural shifts that take place to ensure that FGUS succeed in college (e.g., balancing teaching with research). The challenge is well worth it if it means more successful students, given the distinct benefits of a college education.

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