

University, Political Science, and My Courses

Bruce Gilley
Assistant Professor
Division of Political Science
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government
Portland State University

Updated: 26 September 2010

What is a University?

A university is an institution of higher education. Its purpose is higher education. So what is higher education? It is education beyond high school, where a high school education is intended to prepare individuals to be minimally functional members of society. By definition then a university is intended to make you more than the minimum. For some this means giving you qualifications in the job market that get you beyond the minimum clerical and entry-level jobs. For others this means giving you more than the minimum skills in thinking and communication to excel in the new services economy. For still others this means giving you more than the minimum of knowledge needed to live a more fully aware life. Our time on this planet is very brief and very partial (in a specific location and socio-economic-cultural milieu). University helps us to live more fully by being more aware of the variety of human experiences, human achievements, and human thoughts. It gives us perspective every time we hear a talking-head on the video screen telling us that we live in “troubled times”. You should gain perspective on your own life, and in the process enlarge it immensely. Higher education will also make your life more productive, more socially beneficial, and more connected to the “civilization” of values and learning that have informed your past and will be passed down to your future.

University classrooms are not places for political advocacy. They are places for cultivating a knowledge and love of traditions of inquiry into different fields. The Oregon legislature declared in 2007 that higher education serves many functional needs in the political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental needs of a society. It also said that it serves personal needs. Here is what the legislature said on this:

Oregonians need to cultivate an advanced literacy essential to leading productive and rewarding lives. This includes the capacity to think logically and critically; to internalize and exemplify humane values; to write, speak and figure clearly and accurately; to understand, in some depth, a variety of psychological, historical, cultural, aesthetic and scientific concepts and theories; and to master a range of occupational, professional, vocational, social and personal skills.

A corollary of this approach to the university is that my classes are not applied activism. A university education is not supposed to be the arming of ideological shock-troops for partisan ideas espoused by the professor. It should challenge you with questions of how to live, how to live better, and how to live at all. My courses should challenge you. If you are certain of the truth of “your side” then you need more education. If you do not read widely

outside of your camp, then you are under informed. You should learn about the wider world than you know – in time and space and perspective. If you consider yourself a radical, liberal, conservative, libertarian or any other ideological bent then you need to take the other sides more seriously. They have endured for centuries and will not disappear anytime soon because millions of people find they resound as truth with their lived experiences. Try to find out why. You're not here to narrow yourself by climbing into an echo chamber of like-minded people. As Stanley Fish writes:

So what is it that institutions of higher learning are supposed to do? My answer is simple. College and university teachers can (legitimately) do two things: 1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and 2) equip those same students with the analytical skills — of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure — that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over...The only advocacy that should go on in the classroom is the advocacy of what James Murphy has identified as the intellectual virtues, “thoroughness, perseverance, intellectual honesty,” all components of the cardinal academic virtue of being “conscientious in the pursuit of truth”.

Universities are full of professors. Professors teach and research. The two are closely related. What is taught should reflect what is known and what is known depends on the collective efforts of thousands of individuals like you and your professor. Why do the best universities have the best professors? Isn't “the student experience” more important than research? Well, yes and no, depending on how you define the student experience. Universities are institutions that exist across multiple generations and with multiple stakeholders. The current student body of any university is but a sliver of the stakeholders of that university – despite the over-extended pretensions of student governments. Stakeholders have a stake in the quality and reputation of their institution for it enhances the value of their degree, their sense of self-esteem, their view of the paybacks of the institution, and of its social purposes. When universities cannot produce important research that attracts attention, attracts grants, and makes an important contribution to human knowledge, then it ceases to have value to those stakeholders. Your professor is engaged in a process of institution-building, and you as a student are becoming one of the stakeholders of that institution. You should view your professor in that light. You have a stake in great professors who are working at the cutting edge of research in their field because ultimately universities are refuges for the creation, preservation, and communication of knowledge and understanding.

What am I Supposed to be Doing in University?

Alan Bloom reminds us in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* that a university should be a place where students are given the means to live well, to think about the big issues in life and in society, to understand the dilemmas of both, and to go beyond rationality to consider ethics, imagination, tragedy, hope, and emotion as valid responses to life and to society. University should not be conceived of as self-esteem building, which does not challenge the individual with notions of what is more and less estimable or of value. Vague

notions of “tolerance” and “pluralism” amount to an assault on the virtues and excellences on which all civilizations and cultures thrive. Nor should university be conceived of as mere “service to society” in which the intellectual purpose of the university gets lost in the scramble to “do something useful”. Rather it should be conceived of as a place where the individual challenges themselves to live better, which means knowing more, being challenged more, learning to fail, and finally, if it all works out, emerging with a fuller sense of life and society. Such individuals will be better contributors to society in a broader sense, for they will be inspired to live better. If a university prepares you for a job at all, it should be for your last job, the job where your career reaches its apogee, not your first one.

As Aldus Huxley warned in his 1932 book *Brave New World*, the greatest danger to freedom and justice in our modern democracies is not fear, tyranny, repression, or denial -- the subject of Orwell’s better-known 1949 work *Nineteen Eighty-Four* -- but the exact opposite: pleasure, infinite distractions, feel-good, egoism, trivial popular culture, informational overload, overconsumption, and technological gadgets. In our age this means text-messaging, constant online access, dim-witted distractions on TV (indeed TV as a whole, throw your TV out if you intend to live a serious life), and all manner of feel-good. The problem is not that we are disallowed from challenging thinking or patiently reading books, but that we are unwilling to. We come to university with those same cultural traits: text-messaging, researching on the Internet for instant information, and expecting that our self-esteem and egoism will be reinforced rather than challenged. I ban all electronic devices in my classrooms in order to keep that din of distractions at bay for the hour or so that we are together.

The world is a big and complex place. Your purpose is to learn and to judge – keeping your judgments under the heading “tentative conclusions” lest they stop you from thinking and learning further. A university forces you to ask some basic questions: What is important? Is it race or the environment? Is it literature of nuclear physics? Is it Soviet history or contemporary criminal justice? And then once it confronts you with a host of perspectives on each of these issues it forces you to ask a second question: What is true? University should train your mind to a constant asking of these two questions. If you ever fall into the category of having bumper stickers on your car then you have probably lost the benefits of a university education.

How Do I Become Well-Informed?

Being well-informed is about learning to seek out, and to thirst for, thoughtful, well-informed, and reasonably-argued insights from across the political spectrum. Being well informed means unplugging yourself from the instant-information bizarre that is the Internet and turning instead to reading venerable publications with the institutional, historical, and intellectual resources necessary to sustain quality year to year. A few of my favorites are *The Economist* – the peerless English-language magazine of world affairs – and *The New York Review of Books* – arguably the only serious popular intellectual publication in the U.S.

What Is A Student Trying to Achieve in a Political Science Course?

The purposes of any social science course are both substantive and methodological. Substantively, you should acquire knowledge about a specific field of inquiry. However, it is unlikely you will ever use this knowledge directly – this is what distinguishes the social sciences and humanities from professional schools and the sciences. Instead, we aim to

sharpen and broaden the mind. These aims are achieved through training in effective communication skills, analysis skills, organizational skills, and technology skills.

Communication

- Can you write simply and effectively?
- Do you know how to tailor communications to different needs and audiences?
- Can you speak effectively and confidently before a large audience?
- Do you understand different communications strategies?
- Have you learned how to communicate across party lines?

Analysis

- Do you understand the basic challenges of social science research?
- Can you create a research design?
- Do you know how to identify and frame important political questions?
- Can you conduct basic statistical analysis (regression, descriptive statistics, factor analysis, etc.)?
- Can you summarize arguments, place questions in their broader scientific and historical context, and outline and communicate a research design and its results?
- Can you effectively define and measure concepts?
- Do you understand different approaches to data gathering?
- Have you learned how to reduce normative bias in political research?
- Are you well-read enough and knowledgeable enough to tackle big questions with reference to important cross-national, historical, theoretical, and analytic parallels?
- Are you familiar with major cross-national datasets used in politics?
- Are you familiar with canonical works in political science that frame common understandings?

Organization

- Can you collaborate with others on a research paper?
- Can you assume a leadership role in a group?
- Are you a “good apple” in a group setting rather than a “bad apple”?

Technology

- Are you able to manage a website?
- Can you effectively employ spreadsheet, visual presentation, statistics, formal modelling, and graphics software?
- Are you familiar with technologies used in data gathering?

Setting Standards for Yourself

Studying political science requires a great deal of self-initiative and motivation. The hunger to learn and to know is the key to success in this field. There are no problem sets to do or

formulas to memorize. There is only a structured approach to thinking about politics and a deluge of information on particular political phenomena. Good students in political science are those who are ready to tackle complex and often contradictory problems and who seek to create their own synthesis of the issues involved.

University is a time to become an adult. That means much higher expectations than you are probably used to. No one will tell you to come to class, to hand in your assignments on time, to get in touch with the professor if you miss a class. It's time to set those higher standards for yourself and to live up to them. When you don't show up for a test, you get a zero. If you don't hand in a paper on time, the late clock starts ticking on its own and you will not get pesky emails from the professor.

Grades

A recent study by researchers at the University of California at Irvine, “Self-Entitled College Students” (*Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2008) , found that a nearly half of surveyed students believed they should receive B or higher grade merely for attending classes and completing all required readings and assignments. In my classes, doing the minimum earns a D to C grade. Attaining an average or above-average grade requires better performance, going well beyond merely showing up. To become excellent, set yourself up for excellence by going well beyond what is required. Set your own higher standards, and you will see that translated into higher grades.

I take pride in delivering honest feedback through grades. Unfortunately, PSU as an institution does not. Grade inflation is rampant at our institution and there is no end in sight. Grade inflation devalues the importance of a PSU degree, fails students by not delivering accurate relative performance feedback, encourages low expectations, and abdicates the important responsibility of the faculty member in making and justifying difficult evaluative decisions. Unfortunately, without a university-wide policy, faculty members (in particular pre-tenure ones) do not have the institutional support to deliver fair and accurate grades. I take grading seriously and make full use of the distribution of grades. I generally limit A grades to students whose performance *far exceeds* course expectations. An A grade in my class reflects superior performance. For comparison purposes, I show my average grades across 379 undergraduate students taught in my first two years at PSU compared to undergraduate grades at PSU as a whole.

	A	B	C	D	F	
PSU Average	45%	33%	15%	4%	4%	
Prof. Gilley Average (10 courses, 379 students)	16%	32%	22%	11%	2%*	16%**

* Completed Coursework; ** Did Not Complete Coursework

Meeting vs. Email

Email is a tool for organizational and informational purposes not for substantive discussions. Use email when you need to ask an organizational or informational question – can I be

absent?, where's the reading?, what was my grade? etc. Come to my office hours or make an appointment by email when you want to discuss a substantive issue: why is my grade so low? is this a good approach in my essay? what should I do after I graduate? etc.

The Internet vs. The Library

The Internet is not a proper research tool for university papers aside from online access to journals, policy papers, institutions, etc. It suffers from several problems: a lack of authoritative filtering, a strong presentist bias, and a tendency to respond to immediacy with snippets and sensation. If you rely on the Internet for the information you might as well not be in university. The Internet is also full of monstrous errors, especially on the unregulated Wikipedia site. The only time that Internet references should be given is where they refer to the original source agency of an online publication (like World Bank statistics from the World Bank site, a Brookings Institution paper from the Brookings site, etc.). Blogs, Wikipedia, etc. are useless as information sources and should not be used unless they are the subject themselves. Moreover, do not assume that a paper you find on the Internet that is ascribed to a reliable institution is genuine. Many get doctored and reposted by those with an axe to grind. If you are going to quote a translation of a Serbian newspaper by the BBC Monitoring Service you must obtain that translation from the BBC Monitoring Service itself, not one posted on a Serbian nationalist website. Books and libraries are the proper place to expand your mind. As a student at a major research institution, you should make great use of the library. Take the time and energy to get books from the shelves.

Winning Scholarships and Awards

PSU and many outside agencies have many scholarships and awards available for undergraduates. Many often get only a few applicants per year. Scholarships are not just about financial help: they are a recognition of your merit and potential to contribute to society. In other words: they enhance your CV. Apply early and often. Many scholarships are available through PSU's online scholarship application, ScholarX. Students only have to fill out one application to be automatically be placed in all scholarship application pools for which they meet the selection criteria. This includes the scholarships that are available within a major, college, and the entire university.

Buying Books

America's 17 million university and college students spent \$7 billion on textbooks in 2008, or \$400 per student. By contrast, the average annual tuition fee for a four-year public university was about \$7,000 per year and dormitory charges are about \$4,000 per year. In other words, textbooks represent only about 4% of the direct cost of being at university (and maybe only 1-2% if the opportunity costs of foregone wages is included). Lesson: if you've sacrificed so much to be in the classroom, why undermine that investment by not buying as many relevant books as possible? You have spent 99% of the costs to get yourself into the classroom: why lose all the benefits by failing to spend that last 1%? Why invest in a bicycle but not pay a dime to inflate the tires? Get yourself to the bookstore and invest in all the mandatory and recommended texts and other relevant books (professors often include additional readings on their syllabi) with which you will surround yourself for four years and then provide a life time of re-reading.

Writing Assignments

Complete all writing assignments on time. Before you do come and talk to me about your paper. Print them out and hand them to me directly in class or to the department. Emailing me a paper shows a cavalier attitude to your own work, not to mention to our relationship as student and teacher. Papers handed in early tend to get better feedback. Papers handed in late will be penalized **5% per university business day late.**

Dropping and Grade Option Changes

I will not sign a form to drop a course nor change a grade option after the Friday of Week 5 (i.e. halfway through the course).

Academic Dishonesty

Who are you kidding when you cheat? Plagiarism, bought papers, exam cheating are widespread and yet serve no one, least of all yourself. Moreover, they are grounds for expulsion. Don't do it.

Help!

If you find yourself struggling to understand lectures or readings, or with tests or writing assignments, the time to seek help is now. You may seek out help from university student services (writing center, counseling center, etc.) or from me. Just seek it out somewhere. Do not wait until the last week of class, or until you get your final mark to tell me that you found the class mystifying.

Recommendations

I am happy to write recommendations to students who feel that I know their work and whose grade in my course is an A- or higher.