

When $t = 1$ and $N = 2$: Creating a Political Science Program at a New Research University

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“The idea of building a place from scratch is fascinating but scary.”

—Lee Sigelman, former editor of the *American Political Science Review*

If you could start a political science program from scratch, how would you do it? Given no institutional history, how would you design graduate and undergraduate programs? How would you grow your faculty? How would you attempt to build a reputation in the absence of a reputation at time $t=1$? In an interdisciplinary environment, with which disciplines would you work most closely? For most political science professors, these might be interesting hypothetical questions to consider. For the two of us, these questions are very real and have dominated our recent work lives as we have just finished our first year as the founding political science faculty at the brand new University of California campus, UC Merced.

Over the course of our first year, both of us have often been asked about our unique professional situation. In terms of tone, questions have run the gamut from, “Is it as exciting to build a new program as I think it would be?” to “Why on earth would you take a job at a brand new university?” In this essay, we share a year’s worth of experiences, aspirations, and occasional frustration starting

a political science program at a new research university.

The Mission (and We Did Choose to Accept It, Didn’t We?)

The University of California, Merced, is the tenth campus of the University of California system and the first American research university built in the twenty-first century. Classes began on September 5, 2005, with nearly 900 students. The ultimate planned size for the university is 25,000 students, although it will obviously take a few decades before this enrollment projection is met.

When the campus opened in 2005, there were no political scientists on the faculty. To rectify this shortcoming, we were both hired during this first year and arrived on campus at the end of the summer of 2006. We were not strangers to one another, as we overlapped in graduate school at University of California, Davis and kept in touch over the years. We were especially pleased to learn of one another’s job offer and decision to accept. Each of us had his own reasons for coming to UC Merced, but perhaps the biggest consideration was to pursue the opportunity to build a political science program the way we thought one should be built.

We immediately got to work. Our short-term goal was to put political science on the map at UC Merced. To do this, we first needed to create a political science major and the accompanying courses as well as promote the field of political science within the university. The creation of the major and the “marketing” of political science within the UC Merced community were of particular short-term importance in the sense that political science was already behind several other related disciplines (e.g., cognitive science, economics, history, and psychology) in terms of campus presence and recognition. This initial disadvantage resulted from the fact that faculty associated with these disciplines had been on campus for at least two years prior to our arrival.¹ Fortunately, as we discuss below, the head start these

other disciplines enjoyed also provided us with an important set of resources. Nonetheless, we needed to make the case that political science can and would be an important component of the intellectual, research, and educational life of the university.

UC Merced’s primary goal is to become a comprehensive world-class research university. Our long-term mission as a political science program dovetails with that of the broader university. We seek to build a top-notch program that produces innovative research of the highest quality, provides graduate students with cutting-edge training, and produces well-trained undergraduates who are prepared for graduate school or to begin their careers. Although the development of a top political science program with a thriving graduate program is not something that we can reasonably attain in the short-term, we faced our first year with the belief that it is imperative that we begin laying the groundwork as soon as possible.

Exciting Opportunities and Important Resources

Building a new program is a daunting task. Fortunately, we enjoy several significant comparative advantages and important resources while engaging in our program-building mission.

A Blank Slate

Most, if not all, political science departments are actively engaged in program-building efforts targeted at improving the department in some manner. One key opportunity or advantage that we have is that we lack the institutional baggage that existing programs have. When we arrived on campus, there was no political science major, no outdated strategic plan for political science, and no vestigial programs associated with previous initiatives or commitments. In other words, not only had relevant institutions and beliefs not hardened, there really were not any relevant institutions or beliefs at all. We were (and largely

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continue to be) starting with a blank slate. All options are open.

The Interdisciplinary Environment

One of the major draws of coming to UC Merced included the opportunity for interdisciplinary research and learning. Since political science is a borrowing discipline, we thought it would be an intellectually stimulating environment for interdisciplinary interactions. Thus far, it has been. The myriad colloquia given by faculty in other disciplines have better acquainted us with their research and also enriched our own. For example, we have both attended talks in the “Mind, Technology, and Society” series sponsored by the cognitive science program. When was the last time you attended a talk with a title like, “On the Real-Time Modulation of Visual Search by Linguistic Input”? This talk, given by an incoming cognitive science faculty member, had our heads spinning but offered many interesting approaches that could be applied to the study of politics. In many of these talks, we have seen interesting opportunities for applying concepts and approaches in cognitive science to questions about politics.

Already, several opportunities for interdisciplinary research and teaching have presented themselves. Hansford, for example, is teaching an undergraduate statistical methods course for both economics and political science students. Nicholson is a cognitive science affiliate faculty member. He recently led a graduate seminar in cognitive science on decision making in political science and participates in experimental research in collaboration with cognitive science faculty.

We are especially excited about integrating political science with economics and cognitive science for the purpose of training graduate students. Working with cutting-edge faculty from these disciplines (in combination with political scientists, of course) should provide our students with an impressive set of skills that other political science programs would have a difficult time providing. Not surprisingly, we also think this type of graduate training would enrich our own research.

The Importance of the “UC” in UC Merced

While UC Merced is a new university campus, the University of California has nine other established, world-class campuses. Being part of the UC system is a tremendous resource for UC Merced, and

has been important for our program-building efforts in political science. To start, being a University of California campus grants UC Merced, and its programs such as political science, legitimacy that it would not have if it were simply the University of Merced. In addition, we have been able to call on the expertise and experience of other political scientists in the University of California system. Several times in the past year we have needed the assistance of senior political scientists, and we have found our senior colleagues on other UC campuses to be very willing to help. For example, colleagues at other UC campuses have served on search and other personnel committees. Being part of the University of California system also means that UC Merced need not develop all of its policies and procedures from scratch. For example, the University of California has very specific guidelines for the hiring of faculty and our hiring procedures at UC Merced are governed by these guidelines.

Being a part of the UC family has also had unexpected benefits. At the end of the spring semester, Emily Polsby, the late Nelson Polsby’s daughter, generously offered her father’s 10,000-volume book collection to the university library. Nelson Polsby, as most in the discipline know, was an intellectual leader in the study of American politics. Although Polsby was on the faculty at UC Berkeley, he generously served as a consultant for UC Merced prior to our arrival. Ms. Polsby said that her main concern was that students be able to benefit from her father’s years of careful book collecting. She thought he would have loved to think that his books were being read and used by a new generation of scholars. We thought this was a fantastic idea and encouraged our library to pursue this amazing gift. Although the acquisition is not finalized, our library informs us that it looks highly promising and the process has recently begun. We are honored to help contribute to Polsby’s legacy by providing his book collection with a second life in our library. With this gift, UC Merced’s collection of political science books would increase several fold.

Constraints and Challenges

With the excitement and possibilities offered by the opportunity to begin a new political science program at a new university come unique challenges, problems, and frustrations. Many of these challenges flow from the same source as the opportunities and advantages discussed above.

The Downside to the Blank Slate

Starting from scratch is exciting but difficult. The political science program specifically and UC Merced in general don’t have the infrastructure and established procedures and norms that established departments and universities enjoy. The general policies and procedures of the UC system apply to UC Merced, but the implementation details often need to be ironed out. This can lead to uncertainty about how to accomplish tasks that would be routine at other universities, which in turn can lead to delays in the execution of tasks.

Many tasks we do involve doing things that faculty at other universities, at least those who do not hold administrative positions, likely take for granted. In addition to creating the major, the two of us have had to develop matriculation policies, plot future course offerings, and search for a lecturer for the next academic year. We have also created a political science homepage, vision statement, and speaker series. Unlike other political science programs, we cannot rely on strong prior enrollments to justify investing resources in political science. This makes us spend more time advertising (e.g., attending new student orientations) and otherwise appealing to students to consider majoring in political science than we would otherwise choose to do. In addition, since our library is new, we also put together a list of “must have” books in political science (which we did prior to learning about the Polsby gift).

Starting a graduate program will be difficult because it requires a critical mass of faculty and graduate students. We cannot offer graduate seminars if there are only two graduate students. There will be a chicken-and-the-egg problem—we will need students to start the program but there will need to be a program to bring in students.

What Reputation?

Program reputation matters. It affects faculty hiring and retention, student recruitment, and overall morale. Being brand new, UC Merced’s political science program has very little in the way of reputation, good or bad. What reputation it has is likely a function of UC Merced being part of the UC system. Our largely undefined reputation will make it difficult to hire faculty who are particularly interested in the reputation of a program. It will also make it tougher to attract high-quality graduate students once we have launched a graduate program. There is a silver lining to our largely undefined reputation,

however. It is difficult to improve the reputation of a well-established program. As a largely unknown program, albeit attached to a major research university system, it should be significantly easier for external perceptions of political science at UC Merced to change quickly (and we hope for the better).

Progress Thus Far

It is amazing how much the UC Merced campus has changed in the year we have worked here. The three main academic buildings are now fully functional and have earned distinctions for their environmental friendliness, a gym has been built, and the first club sports teams have been founded (and etched their first victories). The campus even has a grassy quad now, where previously there was just a dirt field. We believe the political science program has also made considerable progress this year.

Perhaps our most concrete accomplishment involved developing a political science major and steering it through to approval. We had many discussions about what the ideal political science major should look like. Several questions informed our discussions. Should we reject conventional approaches and do something bold and innovative? Should we propose a traditional major? How is political science at UC Merced going to be distinctive? On the one hand, we did not want to automatically follow what other universities had done, but at the same time we didn't want to create a major that students or future colleagues might find unfamiliar or strange.

For a while we thought seriously about proposing a major that was "not your parent's political science major." Rather than traditional fields of study, we considered organizing the study of politics around political institutions and behavior. This division made great sense to us given that it largely reflects what we see as a major organizing principle of the discipline. Pedagogically, we thought that organizing the major in this way would encourage students to think broadly across subfield boundaries. As much as we liked this idea (and still do), in the end we opted for a more traditional major with a few distinctive twists.

The traditional aspect of the major is that we offer American politics, comparative politics, and international relations as the major fields of study. Our decision to retain the traditional subfields was informed by discussions we had with prospective undergraduates, parents, and colleagues in and outside the university. In these conversations, people would often ask about specializing in one of

these subfields. In the end, then, familiarity was important.

We did not, however, have such doubts with regard to two somewhat unusual features of the major. First, part of our major requires students to choose from a selection of classes from cognitive science, economics, history, philosophy, and psychology. Although these courses are outside the discipline, they provide tools useful for understanding politics. The second modification is that we emphasize the research enterprise in the undergraduate major. Undergraduate political science education is typically quite distinct, in a qualitative sense, from research and graduate training in the field. We seek to bridge the gap by teaching students how to be critical consumers of political science research and providing them with the most basic skills necessary to conduct their own research. To this end, we require a rigorous research methods class and incorporate a meaningful research component into most upper-division courses. While not a function of the major, it is also worth pointing out that we are involving undergraduates as research assistants, which further reinforces the centrality of research to a political science education at UC Merced.

We have also had success in marketing political science to undergraduates and, for that matter, to UC Merced faculty in other disciplines. Nine months ago there were no political science majors on campus. While we do not have any hard numbers at this point, we do know that many students have made it clear that they now consider themselves as political science majors. Faculty in other disciplines are also excited about working closely with political science now and in the future. The next few years should witness numerous collaborative projects between political scientists and scholars in other disciplines.

On the Agenda

In the coming years we will prioritize the creation of a political science graduate program. We have decided for now that we will accept applications for graduate study in political science, but only if the students' interests align to some degree with either of our own research agendas and if he or she will be able to leverage relevant disciplines outside of political science. For example, we will seek students who can either benefit by working with economists versed in institutional development and applied econometrics or cognitive scientists working on reasoning and judgment. After we have added faculty, we hope to create a

full-service graduate program in political science that continues to draw on related disciplines.

Last and definitely not least, we will be hiring new faculty. At this point our strategy will be to hire the best faculty we can, regardless of subfield specialty. Although this might appear an odd decision since there are only two of us and we have specific curriculum needs, we are mindful that our early hiring will have critical implications for political science at UC Merced. The number one influence on how successful we are at building a strong research-based political science program will be the quality of the faculty we hire. Thus, we believe it unwise to impose rigid subfield constraints on our hiring choices.

The subject of hiring has been recurrent in the questions we have been asked about building political science at UC Merced. Both of us have had colleagues tell us they used to have late night pub conversations with friends in graduate school about how it would be fun to start their own department and hire their friends. Others have told us that they think it is great that we can hire anyone we want doing any type of research we like. The truth is a bit more complicated, however. Given that UC Merced is a new campus and that there are currently only two political scientists, the hiring process involves many more faculty than just the two of us. When candidates interview, they interview with us and with faculty members in related disciplines. After the committee selects a candidate, the faculty in our personnel group—mostly social scientists from other disciplines—vote on this decision. Furthermore, since we are a new UC campus, our university-level personnel committee is primarily composed of UC faculty from other campuses. This committee must approve all faculty hires and plays the crucial role of ensuring that UC Merced hires faculty who meet the standard of scholarly excellence expected within the University of California system.

Time will tell how successful we are at building a thriving political science program at UC Merced. After a year on the job, one thing we can state with certainty is that the journey will not be a dull one.

Afterword

It has been about six months since this essay was accepted for publication and there have been a few important developments. First, the title of the essay will soon be outdated— $N = 2$ will soon become $N = 3$ with our hiring of a new faculty member in the fall of 2007.

Nathan Monroe, a scholar of congressional politics, will be joining us this summer. By the end of the academic year, we hope to have hired a fourth faculty member. Second, there is good news about the political science major. Despite being new to UC Merced this academic

year, political science has become the third largest major in the school of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts. We would love to take all the credit for this development, but given the popularity of the political science major across the University of California system and na-

tionwide, it is not surprising. Lastly, we are in the very early stages of strengthening our ties to related disciplines by planning a new institute focusing on social science research. It is our hope that such an institute will further promote interdisciplinary collaborations.

Notes

*We thank Carissa Hansford, Shawn Kantor, and Jennifer Nicholson for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. While the campus opened to students in the fall of 2005, faculty members were hired in the preceding years.