

**First Impressions: Information Resources in Political Science**

**Departmental Websites and Syllabi**

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## **Introduction**

An important aspect of being information literate is knowing which resources are available, relevant, reliable, and timely. This can be especially difficult for students of political science, a discipline that needs, in addition to scholarly works, a wide range of non-scholarly and grey literature, including materials such as internal reports, government documents, newspapers, polling data, and policy documents. In addition, as the field of political science increasingly incorporates international affairs, those international perspectives must be represented by solid and useful resources if a student's understanding of the international system is to be well-grounded and balanced. Often, these international resources are not easy to find or easy to evaluate, adding a further complication to political science research.

How, then, are these important information resources being highlighted by political science departments and professors? Are departments and professors placing an emphasis on the important issues of academic integrity and the need to cite sources? In order to capture these representations, this study used two important points of contact between a political science department and its students: the departmental home page and course syllabi. These provide a first impression for students and are key opportunities to convey not only the requirements of a degree or course, but also the underlying values of the department or professor. Departmental home pages are also often the first interaction that prospective students and faculty will have with a department. A clean, well-designed, and current home page is a good public relations tool and can go far in demonstrating the importance placed on research by the department.

## **Literature Review**

The amount of literature analyzing syllabi for their effectiveness in teaching and learning

is sparse. As Jeanne Slattery and Janet Carlson state in their article dedicated to this topic, “Syllabi are a ubiquitous part of the teaching process, making the scarcity of research or scholarship pertaining to them surprising” (2005, 159). Although the research is not extensive, there have been several studies that examine syllabi in terms of determining the general components and purposes (Parkes and Harris 2002; Matejka and Kurke 1994) or particular qualities, such as exposure to and use of computer technologies (Madson, Melchert, and Whipp 2004).

There have also been a number of studies that analyze syllabi in terms of library services. Lisa M. Williams, et al. (2004), for example, studied syllabi at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, identifying six levels of library use, such as library use for research papers. The results of that study were then used to improve library services such as collection development and instruction. Linda K. Rambler (1982) took a similar analytical approach with an emphasis on instruction modes in syllabi, such as readings from reserves, lectures, or research papers, and how these would translate into library use. However, these studies of syllabi focus on how the library is referred to or implied in the syllabi and not how information resources are used in general.

This study attempts to evaluate information resources with that expanded view—one that includes the library but goes beyond it as well, assigning some responsibility for teaching students about information resources to departments and faculty. Prior studies focused on how the library might adapt its services to better promote itself to academic departments and faculty. This study suggests that syllabi and departmental home pages could be modified to better serve students and better emphasize the need for information resources and the importance of information literacy. As stated by Parkes and Harris, “[T]he syllabus ultimately becomes an

agreement on roles and responsibilities” (2002, 56). In this sense, syllabi are a great opportunity for professors to set expectations for their students. By requiring students to use authoritative, reliable, and relevant information resources, faculty become instrumental in helping students identify appropriate resources.

Departmental home pages can also be used as teaching tools, leading students to research resources and tools and informing students about the values of a department, such as academic integrity. However, much like the study of syllabi in the context of libraries and information resources, there is not an extensive body of literature about how these resources are represented on academic websites. A number of studies have examined how universities link to their libraries from their home pages (Harpel-Burke 2006; King 1998; Astroff 2001), but there have been no studies that we could identify that evaluate how the home pages of academic departments link to their university’s library. This study seeks to fill that gap, at least in terms of political science departments. As was done with the analysis of syllabi, the study of home pages attempts to broaden the linking discussion from the library to information resources in general.

## **Methodology**

In order to create a manageable sample, we chose to narrow our study to the 48 academic institutions included within a particular category of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. These institutions all provide an undergraduate education in the arts and sciences and the professions and have a high graduate coexistence. This category was chosen because our own institution, American University, and other universities in our geographic area known for their political science programs were included. Because two of the 48 institutions do

not have political science programs, those institutions were eliminated and the final number of institutions included in the study was 46.

For each institution on the final list, an email detailing the purpose of our research was sent to the political science department (or a similarly named department, like ‘government’), requesting copies of faculty syllabi from the past year. In an effort to reduce bias, only one syllabus from each professor was used. (The most recent syllabus was used when multiple syllabi from an individual professor were sent.) This elimination process resulted in a final number of 208 syllabi from ten institutions.

The syllabi were coded for the following qualities, with both authors examining each syllabus:

- Is there any mention of the library?
- Is there any mention of information resources outside of the required and recommended readings?<sup>1</sup>
- When these information resources are mentioned, are they for a specific assignment or for general purposes?
- Is there any mention of international resources?
- Are the students directed to reference librarians for assistance?
- Is the difference between popular and scholarly resources discussed?
- Is there any mention of citation styles or citing sources?
- Is there any mention of academic integrity or the responsible use of information?

A means for classifying the resources mentioned in the syllabi (outside of the required and recommended readings) was also created. Each source was classified as either national or international, and then identified using one of the following six categories:

- Government documents
- Newspapers

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<sup>1</sup> This study is focused on enabling students to do research and encouraging them to seek out information on their own, not on obtaining the sources that have been selected for them.

- Public Policy documents
- Scholarly resources
- Statistical resources
- World Wide Web resources

The political science department home pages of the 46 institutions were also coded for a set of variables:

- Is there any mention of the library or a link to its website?
- Is there any mention of information resources, regardless of the resource type?<sup>2</sup>
- Is there any mention of international resources?
- Is there any mention of citation styles or citing sources?
- Is there mention of academic integrity or the responsible use of information?

## Results

For some variables the syllabi analysis results were better than expected. For example, almost half (49.5%, see Table 1) of the syllabi examined made mention of the need for responsible information use. Closely following this was the need for some type of information resource outside of the required course readings (43.8%), more of which were mentioned in the context of general purposes than for specific assignments. Additionally, a third of the syllabi mention the library in some way. However, the syllabi that discussed the differences between scholarly and popular information (3.4%) were surprisingly sparse. Although a significant number (26.4%) mentioned domestic news resources, all the other information categories

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<sup>2</sup> A link was counted if it had a related name, such as 'Research' or 'Resources,' and led to a page where a student could find research materials or a link to the library. It was not counted if it simply said 'Other links' or something similar, even if that page led to information resources. It was also not counted if the 'Research' link went only to a page about the research that had been done by that department, as this would not be a likely place to begin research for sources outside the required readings for a course.

identified had very low percentages (see Table 2). This was especially true in the case of international resources.

**Table 1: Political Science Department Course Syllabi:  
General Qualities**

Mention the Library	33.2%
Mention Information Resources	43.8%
Mention of Information Resources for a Specific Assignment	18.3%
Mention of Information Resources for General Purposes	29.3%
Recommendation to Visit a Reference Librarian	0.5%
Discussion of Difference between Scholarly and Popular Resources	3.4%
The Need for Responsible Use of Information	49.5%
The Need to Properly Cite Information Used	25.5%

**Table 2: Political Science Department Course Syllabi:  
Specific Information Resources**

<b>Domestic</b>	
Government Documents	5.3%
Newspapers and Media	26.4%
Public Policy Documents	3.4%
Scholarly Publications	11.1%
Statistical	3.4%
World Wide Web Resources	10.1%
<b>International</b>	
Government Documents	0.5%
Newspapers and Media	6.7%
Public Policy Documents	0.5%
Scholarly Publications	0.5%
Statistical	0%
World Wide Web Resources	1.9%

The promotion of information resources on departmental home pages was even less than within the syllabi. A fairly large number of departments (41.3%, see Table 3) had a link to some kind of information resources, but none mentioned or provided links to international resources, and only 17.4% had a link to the library, the place where students can often find the resources recommended by departments and faculty. Further, although the responsible use of information and the issue of citing sources is an ongoing concern in higher education, only one school made mention of either of these issues with a link to the academic integrity code.

**Table 3: Political Science Department Home Pages**

Mention or Link to the Library	17.4%
Mention Information Resources	41.3%
Mention the Need for International Resources	0%
Mention Responsible Use of Information	2.2%
Include Information About Citing Sources	0%

## Discussion

The general impression from the results of this study is that political science syllabi and departmental home pages mention information resources (in the context of research, not simply required readings), the library, and the responsible use of information much less than one might expect in the information-saturated society in which we live and function. There was rarely mention of how a student could find information resources, who could help them, or how to cite the resources in their papers. Although it was often the case that research assignments were described within the syllabi, often in great detail, even syllabi that went to great pains to describe the professors' expectations for these assignments often neglected to discuss their expectations for what kinds of information students should use. Only one professor out of the 208 in this

study, for example, recommended consulting with a reference librarian with questions about locating information for research papers or projects.

This is not to say that detailed information about a particular assignment, such as a research paper, needs to be present in a syllabus. However, there are good reasons for creating expectations about assignments within the syllabus, which is often treated as a contract between the student and professor. The syllabi in this study often followed this model, explaining in great detail the professors' standards and concerns, such as not disrupting class, absences, and the care with which students should read the required materials. Rarely, however, did professors express standards for information quality.

This is also not to say that research should be a component of every course, as it is not always necessary or appropriate. However, a discussion of information resources and quality for general purposes can still be helpful to the students. For example, if multiple perspectives and information formats are present in the required readings, the professor could discuss why this was done.

Many syllabi in this study did bring an emphasis on information-seeking to the course by mentioning that students should read a daily newspaper to keep up with current events. A few syllabi took another step, asking students to read not only one paper, but a variety of papers, in foreign languages if possible, so that they would be reading information from multiple perspectives. An even further step might be to help students determine which papers are reputable and to discuss the importance of authority, timeliness, and reliability.

As reference librarians, we often hear professors say that they wish their students would use better resources—something besides a web page found through Google. We have also worked with students who are frustrated by the lack of guidance from their professors. They

often struggle with where to begin their research or what the difference is between scholarly and popular publications. Studies have been done to discover faculty impressions regarding information literacy, the research process, and their role in that process. The conclusions from these articles indicate that although faculty believe information literacy skills are important (Gullikson 2006), many professors assume that students will acquire the necessary skills as they progress through their academic career without direct attention to these skills by faculty (McGuinness 2006). This passive approach may leave students without the appropriate instruction they need to successfully complete research.

### **Recommendations**

Based upon the results of this study and through personal experience as reference librarians, the authors of this paper offer the following recommendations for improving political science departmental home pages and class syllabi both as a way to lead students to information resources and to internationalize department curricula with guidance to international resources.

- Departmental home pages should provide access to national and international information resources for students. The departmental website can become a portal for students seeking to find resources that will help them more fully understand events unfolding in the global community.
- A link to the university library displayed on the department home page can alert students to the fact that the library provides access to a large collection of newspapers, journals, and books, both domestic and international.
- A link to the academic integrity code could demonstrate the department's emphasis on students being responsible information consumers.

- The syllabus can be used to establish the standards and expectations for research, not only for specific assignments but for general purposes.
- Just as including a link to the academic integrity code on the department's website can be helpful, professors should consider including information on how and when to cite sources in their syllabi. This is a source of great stress for many students, and they could be helped greatly by getting more direction from their professors. If this information is in the syllabus, it is already given a prominent location within the class.
- The field of political science draws from a complex set of information resources, many of which are not used by other disciplines. The syllabus can be used to highlight these fairly unique resources, such as polling data, policy documents, and international government documents, to help students prepare for research in political science.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that students need help in navigating the increasingly information-rich world that we live in. Syllabi and departmental home pages offer a wealth of opportunity in setting standards and expectations for students to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to do comprehensive, ethical research. Further research could be done to examine research paper assignments, documents that might get even closer to understanding how faculty set expectations for their students in regard to their use of information resources. It might also be helpful to examine the required and recommended readings within political science classes to see which information formats are most promoted by faculty.

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