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Resources for Teaching Excellence: APSA's Education Section and the TLC

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Introduction

This chapter covers the role of APSA's Political Science Education (PSE) Section and Teaching and Learning Conference (TLC) within the political science community. After outlining each institution, we discuss the benefits of joining the section and attending the conferences. These benefits are substantial, yielding professional and personal rewards for any political scientist who chooses a career that includes college teaching.

What Do You Need to Know?

APSA's Organized Section on Political Science Education is a formal community for political scientists interested not only in teaching excellence, but also in developing our discipline's tools, techniques, and norms around teaching. Formally stated, its purpose is "...both to promote exemplary undergraduate teaching within the political science discipline and to the scholarship of teaching. The section is especially dedicated to increasing the use of innovative teaching methods, particularly those rooted in experience (internships, service learning, simulations, and study abroad) and the evaluation of such methods" (APSA Connect Section 29).

The section helps coordinate panels at conferences and is active in the planning and organization of APSA's bi-annual Teaching and Learning Conference (TLC) and TLC at APSA—a mini-conference during the APSA annual meeting¹. It also administers awards to recognize innovation in teaching and service to the pedagogical goals of the discipline. The section often advises the staff and leadership of APSA when they embark on new teaching and learning initiatives, like APSA Educate, an online platform for sharing classroom materials launched in 2020.

The goal of the section is to build a community to share teaching ideas and support the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Within the section, smaller communities support specific practices or issues that align with the "tracks" from TLC conferences (see below). Traditionally, the PSE Section has taken a strong interest in civic education, although as of 2020, a separate organized section has been established at APSA to focus specifically on such engagement both inside and outside the classroom.²

From its founding in 2005 until 2017, the *Journal of Political Science Education* was overseen by the PSE section. While this journal is now sponsored directly by APSA, section members remain well represented among the editorial board and contributing authors. The section's newsletter, the *PS Educator*, is published biannually and includes teaching tips and reflections, as well as informal reviews of teaching materials and texts.³

While the section does have nominal membership dues, graduate students do not pay section dues

to join. All members must be active APSA members. Section leadership is elected by members at the annual business meeting held during the APSA Annual Meeting (with informal business meetings also held at TLC). All conference-goers, not just members, are encouraged to attend to learn more about the section.

Why Does It Matter?

Participation in the PSE Section and attendance at TLC are excellent ways to learn the latest pedagogical techniques. You are likely to teach sometime during your PhD program, either as a teaching assistant or as instructor of record. These experiences are valuable for near-term financial reasons (more potential teaching opportunities) and for longer-term development of important career skills.

Becoming an Effective Teacher (and Job Applicant)

You will be better prepared for the teaching expectations of a faculty position if you've spent time thinking about pedagogy and applying different approaches in your own classroom. Unfortunately, not all programs provide pedagogy training for PhD students, but attending TLC can help fill this gap. Hands-on workshops at the conference are particularly helpful in this regard. For example, conferences regularly feature workshops on using simulations and games in classes. In these workshops, attendees not only get instructions and associated materials for the games, but they actually play the games. It is easier to approach a new teaching method with confidence when you have practiced it beforehand and can anticipate how events will unfold.

Even without your own classroom, learning about pedagogy still has professional benefits. When applying for faculty positions, you will be expected to write a teaching statement explaining your classroom approach, how you design syllabi and assessments, and the goals you have for your students. Teaching statements can be especially important for new PhDs with little teaching experience, but who are interested in teaching-focused positions. Exposure to new evidence-based classroom practices and understanding current terminology is critical for crafting a compelling statement. In fact, past TLCs have had dedicated sessions for graduate students assembling application materials, and active PSE section members are helpful mentors for this aspect of the job market.

Teaching is a non-negligible (and incredibly important) part of nearly every faculty member's job. Being a good teacher is not an innate ability, but rather a skill that is learned and practiced. Starting that practice sooner rather than later, in a supportive environment like a TLC, can help you find and develop your identity as an educator and learn pedagogical practices that will have value for you, both as a PhD student and a faculty member.

Building New Networks

Most political scientists remember their first major conference presentation. Navigating to the proper room. Arriving early to quadruple-check the technology. Finally placing faces with names in their field. Advisors and peers often remind graduate students that attending conferences is not just about presenting research, it's about networking. Indeed, while major conferences like APSA's annual gathering incorporate a variety of networking opportunities, it is easy to get lost among thousands of attendees at a convention center. These events draw from across the discipline and are focused principally on the dissemination of research. This means that, despite a large quantity of potential contacts, many attendees at the major conferences work at research-oriented universities that do not represent the most common career trajectories for graduate students. Smaller conferences often lead to richer, more fruitful connections with potential peers, collaborators, and colleagues, with the quality of networking opportunities often more than making up for the lesser quantity.

APSA's teaching and learning events are a perfect example. As noted above, the stand-alone TLC is a separate entity from the larger annual conference and takes place every other year in the spring. It draws a more intimate crowd and affords some of the best opportunities for quality networking in the

discipline, particularly for graduate students aspiring to academic appointments at more teaching-oriented institutions. A larger share of faculty attendees hail from smaller institutions that place less emphasis on research productivity and more emphasis on teaching. They are extremely collegial and are committed to both sharing and improving their pedagogy. Graduate students can mingle with leading pedagogy experts in the discipline in a smaller, less formal environment that lends itself extremely well to casual exchanges of teaching ideas between sessions, in addition to the more formal presentation of teaching and learning scholarship and innovations. Conversations often start during a scheduled session, continue at the coffee station in the hall, and then move to a restaurant at the end of the day.

The design of TLC also encourages productive networking. Rather than scheduling a series of panels over the course of the weekend and inviting attendees to pick and choose individual sessions, TLC combines traditional panel sessions with a “track” model. Participants select a track—such as civic education, technology and innovation, or simulations and games—and attend a series of panels during the conference with the same group of people. Rather than assigning specific discussants, all sessions include a moderator and significant time for open discussion focused both on the papers and on larger issues and take-aways. During that time, attendees can get to know their “trackmates” extremely well. It can also be a great opportunity to meet book publishers and other vendors sharing new educational products and tools.

Expanding Your Publication Options

Informal interactions often lead to productive collaborations and fulfilling friendships, even between people who have never met before. At the 2020 TLC, Eric, one of the authors of this chapter, first met Dan, one of the editors of this volume. During a casual conversation, Eric and Dan discovered a mutual interest in the pedagogy of teaching research methods. They soon connected with Julia, another editor of this volume, and formalized an edited book proposal that would ultimately become *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Research Pedagogy*. At the same conference, Colin, another author of this chapter, participated in rich conversations as part of the “Teaching Research, Writing, and Information Literacy” conference track that led to a cross-college collaboration where research methods students shared surveys and feedback with students on the other side of the country. Similarly, all three *Teaching Civic Engagement* books⁴ published by APSA were launched at the TLC-based on connections forged at the conference and section meetings where chapter author Elizabeth met co-editors Elizabeth Matto, Allison McCartney, and Dick Simpson—along with current APSA President John Ishiyama who encouraged Elizabeth to edit the first volume and contribute two handbook chapters.⁵ Similarly, Elizabeth contributed chapters to a book on civic education co-edited by two scholars she met through the PSE section,⁶ and co-founded the Consortium for Intercampus SoTL Research with fellow conference-goer J. Cherie Strachan, another editor of this volume.⁷ APSA books on assessment⁸ and internships⁹ were also conceived during track sessions, conference panels, and informal receptions for APSA's teaching and learning community.

Participation in APSA's Political Science Education Section and teaching conferences offers a wide range of opportunities for publication. Section members serve as editors and editorial board members for outlets like the *Journal of Political Science Education* and *PS: Political Science & Politics*, and many articles included in the journal were first presented at TLC or at APSA annual meeting panels sponsored by the PSE section. There are also relatively quick publication opportunities that enhance graduate school résumés while building one's reputation in the field. In addition to publishing full-length articles,¹⁰ *PS: Political Science & Politics* publishes summaries of each of the TLC tracks each July, and track moderators often give preference to graduate student authors. All PSE section members are encouraged to share ideas about teaching through brief (1,000 to 1,500 word) essays in the *PS Educator*¹¹ and are frequently asked to write brief essays for APSA online platforms, including APSA Educate and Raise the Vote. It is important to note that some institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges and regional comprehensive universities) will likely value these publications, and the scholarship of teaching and learning, more than other institutions (e.g., R1 universities). This is worth considering as you decide how much time to devote to such work. One of the authors, Colin, found such publications helpful in transitioning from a

research-intensive PhD program to a teaching-focused faculty position.

What Should/Can You Do?

Graduate students interested in the PSE section have several ways to get involved. Perhaps most important is attending TLC and/or TLC at APSA, in order to see the range of pedagogical scholarship and practice. The section is eager to raise the importance and profile of teaching and learning in the discipline, and enthusiastically welcomes any political scientists interested in improving teaching. It is worth reaching out to anyone leading an interesting workshop or giving a paper on a topic of interest, as they are likely willing to share materials and introduce you to other members.

Joining the section is also an important way to get involved (and, again, it is free for graduate students!). Membership grants access to private discussion boards on APSA Connect and the *PS Educator* newsletter and also allows you to participate in section leadership.¹² As noted above, members wishing to write short reflections will find the *PS Educator* to be a relatively open outlet for writing about teaching practice and getting some early (non-peer-reviewed) publications. It is a great way to share ideas and build a reputation, especially when combined with the informal networking opportunities available at the annual TLC mini-conference at APSA and bi-annual standalone TLC.

Finally, there are a number of awards to recognize teaching excellence for graduate students, beginning faculty, and/or contingent faculty. At the section level, the Craig L. Brians Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research and Mentorship emphasizes work encouraging undergraduate scholarship. There is also an award for best paper presented at the previous year's meeting. APSA presents two annual teaching and learning awards, the CQ Press Award for Teaching Innovation and the Michael Brintnall Teaching and Learning Award. Most colleges and universities have internal awards as well, and it is worth looking to your teaching and learning center or faculty development office for these opportunities; APSA also publicizes members who win campus teaching awards in *Political Science Today*. There are exceptions, but it is worth emphasizing that most academic awards not only accept but actively encourage self-nominations. The process of applying for these may not only recognize the hard work that graduate students and new faculty put into teaching but can serve as helpful opportunities to reflect on your own goals and accomplishments.

Conclusion

Teaching is an important part of most faculty jobs in political science, and teaching experience is highly valued by many institutions as they consider candidates for faculty positions. Liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and regional comprehensive universities often seek out candidates who have demonstrated an interest in teaching; such institutions pay greater attention to teaching statements and course evaluations as part of the job application process and may also require a teaching demonstration. Fortunately, there are many resources like the American Political Science Association's Political Science Education Section, Teaching and Learning Conference, and TLC at APSA available to political science graduate students interested in developing their teaching skills, networks, and philosophy.

Endnotes

- 1 TLC at APSA follows a similar structure as the stand-alone TLC event, but is smaller in scale. For graduate students who may only have funding for one conference per year, TLC at APSA is an ideal place to start.
- 2 For information about the Civic Engagement Section go to <https://sites.google.com/view/apsacivic/home>.
- 3 Past issues of the newsletter are available on the Teaching Civic Engagement website at <https://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/political-science-educator/>.
- 4 The books include: *Teaching Civic Engagement* (2013) edited by Alison Rios Millet McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson; *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*

(2017), edited by Elizabeth M. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson; and *Teaching Civic Engagement Globally* (2021), edited by Elizabeth M. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, Alasdair Blair, Taiyi Sun, and Dawn Whitehead.

- 5 Elizabeth A. Bennion. 2011. "Experiments." In *21st Century Political Science: A Reference Handbook*, eds. John T. Ishiyama and Marijke Breuning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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- 6 See Elizabeth A. Bennion (2015), "Partnering with Your Local PBS Station to Promote Civic and Political Engagement," and Cherie J. Strachan and Elizabeth A. Bennion (2015), "Moving the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Forward: The Consortium for SoTL Research," in *Civic Education in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Michael T. Rogers and Donald M. Gooch. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- 7 For more information about the Consortium see J. Cherie Strachan and Elizabeth A. Bennion. 2016. "Extending Assessment beyond Our Own Programs and Campuses: The National Survey of Student Leaders and the Inter-Campus Consortium for SoTL Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (1): 111-115.
- 8 See Michelle D. Deardorff, Kerstin Hamann, and John Ishiyama, eds. 2009. *Assessment in Political Science*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- 9 See Renee Van Vechten, Bobbi Gentry and John Berg, eds. 2021. *Toward Best Practices in Political Science Internships*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- 10 Pedagogy articles tend to be shorter than traditional disciplinary scholarship. At the time of writing, pedagogy articles at JPSE and PS are limited to about 3,000 words.
- 11 Submissions can be sent to editor.pse.newsletter@gmail.com, with deadlines usually falling in December/January and June/July.
- 12 Conference planning and award committees are good places for students or junior scholars wishing to gain or expand national service experience.

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