

## **Strategic Plan 2009-2010**

Department of Political Science

University of Florida

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### **Introduction**

The Department has engaged in an extended conversation about its goals and how to attain them. This has taken the form of its own multi-year process of self-assessment, as well as evaluation through external review. The stated goals of the Department are as follows:

The Political Science Department at UF is in the midst of a marked resurgence in vitality and stature as a doctoral-granting, research-focused program. It is committed to the consolidation of this resurgence with the goal of becoming a leading department in the South, a top 15 department among public universities, and a top 30 department nationally by 2020.

In terms of its self-assessment, the Department still sees itself as falling short of the intentions stated above, but continuing to improve its standing in the discipline. It has transformed itself into an “up-and-coming” department, able to make visible hires, recruit top-notch graduate students, and place its publications in the leading presses and journals in the discipline. Given that ranking and assessment is based on reputation rather than productivity, and that reputation consistently lags behind productivity, we believe that the Department is well-positioned to continue its upward trajectory, barring the necessity of major disinvestment by the college or university, or loss of key personnel.

Our focus in the next period is further to enhance the graduate program. Our intention is to produce more competitive students and place them better on the job market. If we are to be a nationally recognized department, we believe that we need to do this in four major subfields – American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. We also think it is critical to maintain a strong methods faculty to equip our students with the tools necessary to practice research. In American Politics the focus is on institutions, political behavior, and public policy as well as the intersection between them. Comparative Politics is focused on issues of regimes, regime change, and development, and has geographic strengths in Africa, Europe, and Latin America, where it has benefitted from cooperation with the Title VI area centers. International Relations is focused on normative, critical, and interpretive approaches to the theory and practice of world politics. And Political Theory employs historically informed, interdisciplinary methods and perspectives to explore how gendered,

racial, social, political, technological and ecological identities are shaped and contested in a globalizing world of rapid change.

The Department has begun to place an increasing number of graduate students in Research I institutions and elite liberal arts colleges. Our goal is to do this more consistently, especially with regard to peer research institutions. We believe that in concert with visible hires and publications this constitutes the most effective means to raise the standing of the Department. We also believe that this can initiate a virtuous circle for the graduate program. Good placements will lead to even better applicants.

The Department plans to undertake three initiatives on its own to pursue these goals. Whereas implementing these initiatives does not require direct college support, their long-term success will depend on further college investment in the Department. These three initiatives are: (1) the reorganization of American Politics subfield, (2) the creation of foci in emerging areas of research across departmental subfields, and (3) revision of the core requirements in the graduate program. We will also outline a fourth area, where we have identified barriers to the goal of creating a vibrant environment for research and graduate training.

### **1) Reorganization of American Politics.**

Departmental reputations in political science, like other disciplines, may strongly influence the quality of graduate student applicants, the placement of those students after they attain advanced degrees, and the capacity of faculty members to win prestigious grants and fellowships. Among political science departments in the United States, particularly those in public universities, overall reputations appear to depend to a significant degree on what is typically the largest field, American politics.<sup>1</sup> The Americanist cohort at UF brings an additional strength to the Department by its contribution to the internationalization of the curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

From a strategic planning perspective, therefore, the Department's American Politics program is a high priority. Over the past ten years or so, the College and Department have invested heavily in this area and seen a corresponding increase in the number of doctoral students, the breadth of the curriculum, the number of completed Ph.Ds, and significantly better placements of graduates, including several at Research I institutions. Two key issues arose in discussions of the American Politics program: the impending change of personnel, and the capacity of the current field organization to produce the best possible graduate training. Both

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<sup>1</sup>A 2004 compilation of its (non-student) membership's field specialization by the American Political Science Association indicated that American and Comparative Politics were the two largest fields (at 21% and 22%, respectively). If the 15% of members residing outside the US were excluded and the membership of several other fields were allocated by geographic focus, it's likely that the American Politics specialization would increase significantly. See [http://www.apsanet.org/content\\_6832.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/content_6832.cfm)

<sup>2</sup>Faculty who are classified as Americanists in our department have taught and published research on a wide range of nations: Canada, Ireland, France, Nicaragua, Ghana, and Israel—to name but a few.

issues are likely to have a major impact on the Department's national standing and on its expressed goal to join the top fifteen political science departments in public universities.

In the short to medium term (5-10 years), American is likely to undergo substantial change. The Department could lose up to five senior Americanists. These impending changes offer both opportunities and challenges for the graduate program. With a generational change due to the eventual retirement of most of the existing senior cohort, the Department will have an opportunity to reinvent its program in American politics. Yet attrition, if unaddressed, will also entail the loss of considerable accumulated disciplinary reputation, graduate training capacity, and research output.

In light of this situation, **the faculty has begun and needs to continue discussions about the future of the American program and to assign a high priority to keeping the American program strong.**

In the course of consultations with the faculty, the current organization of American politics arose repeatedly, and culminated in an open meeting between the current members of the American field and the Strategic Planning Committee. The faculty who specialize in American politics are currently divided into three separate and autonomous fields: American political institutions (which is, for practical purposes, equivalent to the American field committee), American political behavior (via the Political Behavior field), and American public policy (the Public Policy Field Committee). Each field is self-governing and determines its own priorities for both graduate student and faculty recruitment. There are both strengths and weaknesses to this arrangement. On the one hand, the current American field committee has a common intellectual focus in institutional development and has recruited a core of first-rate graduate students with such interests. On the other hand, because the current American field committee is limited to faculty who are institutionalists, it has not taken full advantage of the resources that could be offered by the Americanists who are not primarily institutionalists. As the external reviewers commented during their 2006 visit to campus, this arrangement has diminished the voice of American politics in Departmental deliberations, recruitment, and hiring.

The Department will move to **consolidate these three fields into a single field committee.** This unified committee would be responsible for governance, recruitment, and hiring purposes. Bringing together three field committees into one must not threaten the considerable accomplishments of each since the current structure was adopted. **The best way to achieve this, we believe, is to allow graduate students in American to elect two of the American fields—institutions, policy and/or behavior—as examination *fields*.**<sup>3</sup> We emphasize that this is an **option**, not a requirement. A student with American institutions as a first field could still choose second and third fields in, say, Political Theory and Political Methodology. This unique arrangement is necessary to facilitate the integration of American politics without diluting the

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<sup>3</sup>As part of that arrangement, students from other fields would be eligible to take exams in these three fields as well.

institutional core that has developed by virtue of the subdivision. On all other matters, the (united) American politics field committee would enjoy the same autonomy and constraints as other field committees.

By addressing these two issues, we believe the study of American politics will be strengthened in both the short and long run. Departmental governance will be streamlined to four major fields (American, Comparative, International Relations, and Theory) and an additional field committee to oversee training and testing in methods (Political Methodology).

## **2) Cross-field Initiatives.**

The Department is organized into topical fields that mirror those of the discipline both nationally and internationally, and as such it makes sense to maintain these fields both in Departmental governance and in program design at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. But over time some areas of study have come to reach across fields and have created new research communities, both within political science and across disciplines. Two such areas in which the department has already developed strength are environmental politics, and religion and politics. Both areas span at least 3 of the four topical fields in the Department and allow us to address issues of contemporary political importance which no one subfield on its own can fully encapsulate. New cross-field initiatives are also under way by groups of faculty working on the politics of migration and gender politics.

Creating mechanisms for graduate student training in these areas can strengthen the Department in a number of ways. First, training graduate students into these research communities can increase their marketability. For example, several tenure-track positions have been posted recently that specify environmental politics, or religion and politics but do not require a specific field. Training in these areas of research cannot replace field training as the core of a graduate student's presence on the job market, but they can usefully supplement it. Second, a focus on cross-field areas of specialization can be used to attract prospective graduate students who would otherwise not think to apply here. This has, for example, already happened to some extent with respect to religion and politics. Recent changes to the Department's doctoral admissions process have already facilitated this. And finally, the creation of cross-field groups can help our faculty with their research, by creating pools of expertise within the Department that mirror the audiences we are trying to reach outside of the Department.

Cross-field working groups can be created at various places on a spectrum of institutionalization, and the next step in the Departmental discussion of the matter is to decide on a preferred level of institutionalization. At the institutionally minimalist end of the spectrum, groups can be left informal, but the rules of the doctoral program can be modified to make it easier for students to put together second fields in cross-field foci on an ad hoc basis. At the more institutionalized end of the spectrum, one of the proposals submitted to the Strategic Planning Committee calls for cross-field groups to be formalized. These groups would require

faculty from at least three of the four substantive fields, and would need to make the case that the focus in question has at least some research community outside of the Department to draw on, and some presence in the tenure-track job market. Groups would then develop core course offerings that mirror second field requirements of existing fields, and doctoral students could test in the cross-field concentration as a matter of course. New groups could be created as both faculty expertise and broader research communities develop, and existing groups could be reinforced by additional hires when they prove themselves effective at attracting new students and placing graduating ones. Groups would of course need to be dissolved when they ceased to be active at the faculty level or ceased to attract student interest.

In the near future, **the Department as a whole should decide upon the appropriate level of institutionalization, and create the appropriate rules and mechanisms to support the working groups at the determined level.** This will allow the Department in the medium term to build on the strengths of its faculty, add a new dimension to its graduate programs, and present the College and the University with innovative plans that speak directly to developing research foci in both our institution and our discipline.

### **3) Revision of the Core Requirements in the Ph.D. program.**

We wish to undertake a revision of these requirements to allow for greater flexibility in methods training. The Department continues to be committed to a pluralistic methodological vision of the discipline. As the core requirements are currently structured, however, graduate students looking to use quantitative analysis early on in their research are at a disadvantage because the current requirements prevent them from studying such methods until their second semester.

Under the present system, in their first semester incoming graduate students are required to take two courses -- POS 6736 "Conduct of Inquiry," and POS 6716 "The Scope and Epistemologies of Political Science." Students are also generally expected to take the field seminar in their major. Quantitative training in POS 6737 "Political Data Analysis" does not commence until the second semester. For students who are looking to use quantitative methods this delays their ability to undertake research.

We will **resequence the graduate requirements to require Scope and Epistemologies in the first semester and Conduct of Inquiry in the second. All students would also choose a second required course in the first semester – either Data Analysis or Politics and Theory (POT 6505). They would then have to take the second of these courses in the third semester. This will commence with the incoming class of Fall 2011.** We believe that Scope is the better choice in the first semester because it introduces students to the diversity of questions, methods, and approaches in the discipline. Because both Conduct and POS 6737, Political Data Analysis, overlap in terms of exposing students to a "normal science" framework, it is best not to inundate incoming students with this perspective in their first semester. This is particularly true

for those whose work would benefit from concentration on other methodologies or methodological eclecticism.

There was additional discussion about strengthening the graduate program by requiring first and/or second year students to work as research assistants with a professor in their area. In our program, there is often a significant time lag between when students take research methods courses and when they first conduct research. By getting the students involved in research immediately, their methods training will be reinforced. Some faculty felt this research practicum could be done by a one-credit or no-credit requirement while others believed the practicum should be a three hour course. If the faculty supports this idea, there will have to be careful consideration of our capacity to provide research supervision for all students, the effect on the ability of students to complete required courses, and the potential effect on the curriculum. Given the complexity of the issue, **the Department does not have a specific policy recommendation at this time, but recommends that the Chair create a committee to explore this issue and recommend action to the faculty.**

In addition, we heard suggestions that second year graduate students complete a professionalization sequence that would cover a number of topics essential to their success (e.g., comprehensive exams, the dissertation prospectus, dissertation writing, conference participation, the article publication process, the book publication process, grant applications, post-docs, the job market, tenure and promotion, etc.). It makes sense to consider this in tandem with the idea of a research practicum.

#### **4) Obstacles to Progress that Require Assistance from the College.**

a) Infrastructural Limitation – **Grant Writing Support.** Many peer institutions maintain a college office which helps faculty to write effective grants. The external review of the Department identified the level of support in the college as an obstacle to competing for such grants. The onus now falls on faculty to identify such grants, fill in all forms, pursue the necessary institutional support and pledges, as well as to write the substantive proposal. Support with regard to the first three requisites would make submitting such applications less onerous for faculty, and enhance the chances of success by freeing faculty to work on the substance of such proposals.

b) Infrastructural Limitation – **Computer Support.** Many faculty labor with antiquated hardware and hardware meltdown is an all too common, productivity sapping, occurrence. Many faculty lack the optimal software to accomplish their work. This is particularly difficult for faculty, who have not received raises due to the budget crisis, and who require expensive software (statistical packages and the like) and must pay for it out of pocket or do without. For instance, a site-license for the Department for state of the art statistical packages (e.g. Stata) would be a great help.

c) **Enrollment Floors.** The college has instituted a minimum enrollment of seven students to offer courses at the graduate level. This presents a problem for some of the more specialized seminars we wish to offer, particularly in methods training. Certain methodological offerings are very helpful to a handful of students (e.g. Boolean methods, advanced statistical techniques like hierarchical linear modeling or event history, fieldwork training). Such classes will not necessarily attract seven students in a given year, but are indispensable to dissertation work and being competitive on the job market. **The ability to obtain waivers on the seven-student minimum for such courses,** as long as the Department maintains a mean of over seven enrollees per course, would make such advanced training possible.

With regard to methods, the Department is highly supportive of planned initiatives in the college to create a cross-departmental methods consortium to offer advanced training, and recognizes this as a viable alternative in the long term to enrollment floor waivers.

d) **Travel Money for Graduate Students.** Except for those graduate students connected to the area centers, for whom summer travel money is still sufficient, the current fiscal crisis has dried up support for travel. There is little or no money for conference participation, or to support preliminary trips to archives or field sites to prepare for dissertation research. It is difficult enough that we do not have sufficient money to pay for faculty travel, but in the case of graduate students, for whom networking and establishing contacts is even more vital, this constitutes a formidable barrier to establishing themselves academically.