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Open Education Exploration Grant: Greg Shaw

Greg Shaw
Illinois Wesleyan University

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To: Chris Sweet and Stephanie Davis-Kahl, Ames Library

From: Greg Shaw, political science

Re: Ames Library Open Education Exploration Grant

This memo follows up on an exchange I had with Chris in March of this year. I have been working for several years to increase the use of open-source materials in my introductory American government course, and this opportunity seems like the perfect time take the next steps in moving to entirely open-source materials and to finally be quit of the commercial textbook that I have used for many years. This document explains my goals and how I plan to achieve them in political science 101, American National Government.

My Goals

I very deliberately pursue three main goals with this course: to teach a collection of facts, to foster ways for the students to become more civically involved, and to help them understand how social scientists think about puzzles. Readings, classroom discussions, student presentations, and brief written assignments help the students to learn the basics about the three branches of the federal government, how they interact with each other, and how they influence and are influenced by outside forces, including voters, political parties, and organized interest groups. Assignments push the students to engage the community through voting (when an election occurs during the semester) and attending a city council meeting. Small assignments lead students to undertake analyses, such as the examination of a congressional vote and how party identification and legislators' ideological positioning affect those votes. We also often pause in our discussions to reflect on how, for instance, historians, economists, and political scientists differ on how they tend to think about political behavior. One of the throughlines for this course is to grapple with evidence of representational inequality, specifically, that wealthy Americans are much more likely to receive their preferred public policies than are either middle- or low-income Americans. As we make our way through the dozen modules of the course we pause to consider how prevalent practices of our national politics might contribute to this representational inequality.

The Present Course

I offer American National Government nearly every semester. Most political science majors take it as a way to satisfy the major, though because the course carries general education credit (CSI and U.S. Diversity), most of the students in any given section are not political science majors. Most of the students who enroll in this class have had an American government course in high school, though the average student's knowledge of how our national political system works seems to be thin. My goal has been to remedy that, in addition to giving students opportunities to become civically involved and to provide some insights as to how social scientists tend to think about some of the puzzles associated with political institutions and behavior.

Historically I have used a standard textbook that covers the three branches of government and the major processes of politics: voting and participation, media use, etc. Several supplemental readings and videos allow students to dig more deeply into select topics. These materials complement the fairly comprehensive set of PowerPoint slides that I have built over the years that accompany most of my classroom presentations.

The Plan for Going Forward

I want to diversify the presentations and drop the commercial textbook. Broadly speaking, I plan to blend four streams of open-source material to complement the PowerPoint files that will continue to provide the spine for the course. First, I will adopt *American Government, 2nd edition* from openstax.org. This will serve as a set of basic explanations for our national institutions and processes and will provide a backstop to fill the inevitable gaps that my classroom presentations leave. I will basically use this text as I have used a commercial print text over the years, assigning most of the chapters as weekly readings, referring to particularly interesting examples, and knowing that it will offer a complementary set of explanations to layer atop of what I share in class. This text was last updated in 2020, and you can view it here:

https://openstax.org/details/books/american-government-2e

Second, I will fully integrate into the course a series of videos professionally produced by Harvard political scientist Thomas Patterson. The series includes two dozen videos, each about 25 minutes long, which parallel Patterson's commercial textbook. Each of these freely available videos addresses a major institution or process of politics. I informally introduced these to my class this past spring, and the student feedback was positive. Paterson is clear, organized, and he gets the job done. The students benefit from hearing another faculty member explain some of the main ideas. Here is the link to Patterson's collection of videos:

https://scholar.harvard.edu/thomaspatterson/teaching

Third, several public-interest research organizations – The Brookings Institution, The American Enterprise Institute, and the Urban Institute – all produce thoughtful analyses of Congress, the executive branch, and the courts, among other topics. The Kettering Foundation focuses on quality public discourse and what it takes to foster and sustain a viable democracy in the contemporary American setting. These organizations' publications range from civic journalism, to policy analysis, to critiques of our major institutions. They often take a point of view, and when they do so in a thoughtful way their materials stand in nicely for a pro-con debate format reader. As an example, here's a link to a paper from the Kettering Foundation on perpetual political conflict in the U.S.:

https://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/perpetual-tumult

Fourth, several educational organizations – the History Channel, etc. – have produced videos that will allow me to introduce enough background to support our classroom conversations about the origins of our major institutions and how initial design decisions about political institutions often strongly influence the way these institutions work today (something we refer to as path dependence, an important concept for us). Of these new open-source materials, I will use these

videos the least intensively. Here is a link to one example, and 18-minute explanation of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 produced by the museum staff at Constitution Hall:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJyFCy_9jLM

Challenges That Will Likely Persist

Working with these four streams of material, in addition to my own PowerPoint files, will call for a lot of refreshing from semester to semester. I anticipate spending several weeks during May and June rebuilding the course around these new sources. I have already begun this work. Some of this new material will service us for a long time to come, such as the historical background explanations. Other pieces will need updates across most semesters. While I have refined this course to what I would like to think is a high level over the years, I still commit to ongoing updates as I always have. I plan to survey the students informally (verbal feedback in class) and formally (quizzes) on the suitability of these new materials.

A second challenge has to do with the polarized nature of our politics. My colleagues and I have experienced over the past decade or so that as partisan conflict has intensified, teaching runs into ideological conflict more often in class, often leading to students self-censoring. While I can't do much about the larger context of our national politics, I can strive to select materials that present a diversity of points of view, both to expose students to different perspectives and to maintain a reputation as an honest broker of information and experiences.

I appreciate your support.