

Preaching What We Practice: Bringing Scope and Methods “Back In”

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ABSTRACT Recent discussions of teaching research methods have focused on understanding the relationship between methods courses and the broader discipline, including the need to integrate qualitative methods and other approaches beyond the traditional statistical approaches still common in the majority of undergraduate research methods courses. This article contributes to this conversation by arguing that the basic elements of research design and qualitative techniques should be integrated into substantive (or “non-methods”) courses across the discipline. To accomplish this aim, I offer a brief outline of methodological benchmark skills—drawn from the pool of skills necessary for a successful thesis—that can be taught in various courses across the discipline through a traditional assignment: the semester research paper.

Four years ago, I prepared to teach my first undergraduate political science research methods course at a selective liberal arts college. The assignment was unconventional—as several friends and colleagues noted—because I am not an Americanist. Nevertheless, I was eager to teach a course that is an important component of the discipline, and I believe comparativists can contribute significant insights to undergraduate research methods courses. In preparing the course, I was guided by three principles: First, I had to teach a course that fit the general description of a “scope and methods” course regularly taught by my Americanist colleagues at the same institution. Second, I wanted to make sure that my course would appeal to students whose interests were outside the scope of “American” politics to include area studies, political theory, and international relations. Third, it was essential that the course adequately prepare students to write a senior thesis. The latter was an unnecessary challenge. Neither the course nor a thesis was required for graduation in political science, although it was required for graduation with honors and for graduation in the Latin American studies program to which I was also attached. Since then, I have taught undergraduate research methods at institutions that do require senior theses.

These experiences shaped my attitude toward what I believe a “scope and methods” course should be and its critical place in an undergraduate political science curriculum. They also led me to question why methods courses and senior theses are often conceptually separated from the broader disciplinary curriculum. If our scope and methods are essential components of the discipline that distinguish us from other social sciences disciplines (e.g., history,

sociology, anthropology, economics), then it makes little sense for them to be relegated to a single course in the catalog, particularly if that course is not required for majors. A report by Brandon et al. (2006) suggests that while research methods courses are becoming more common in curricula, students are often not adequately prepared for them. Such findings suggest that political science research methods are isolated from the rest of the discipline—exactly the opposite of what proponents of research methods courses would like. One of the goals of this article is to bring scope and methods “back in” (to borrow a famous phrase from my subfield) to the discipline’s broader curriculum.

This article offers suggestions, based on my own experiences, for integrating research methods into the undergraduate curriculum, with particular foci on both preparing students to write a senior thesis and improving undergraduates’ understanding of our discipline. What I propose, then, is a strategy for filling the space between an undergraduate research methods course and a senior thesis. Although the benchmark skills that I outline in the following sections are essential for writing a senior thesis, they are also key components of “doing” political science. The following recommendations are applicable to a variety of institutions, even those that do not include a senior thesis requirement. I do not argue that a senior thesis is essential for an undergraduate political science program, particularly because the majority of political science majors will not go on to pursue doctoral degrees. However, I firmly believe that learning the basic research skills of our discipline is critical for developing a well-rounded understanding of the discipline. Moreover, the research and critical thinking skills used in political science have practical value in both public and private sector professional careers.

I focus on elements of research design and methods that can—and should—be taught across the discipline: developing a manageable research question, writing a literature review, crafting an

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Table 1

Undergraduate Programs that Require a Thesis or a Methods Course, or Offer a Methods Course within the Department, across Political Science Departments, by Institution Type

| | LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES | PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES | PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Did the program require a senior thesis? | 21% | 21% | 0% |
| Did the program require a methods course? | 42% | 36% | 49% |
| Did the program offer a methods course within the department? | 63% | 79% | 100% |
| Total N | 67 | 14 | 37 |

appropriate research design and selection of cases, defining and operationalizing concepts and variables, and selecting appropriate data sources. The core principle driving these recommendations is the belief that we should preach what we practice in the classroom. That is, we should reflect on the way we “do” political science and impart those skills to our students. The following lessons are derived from my own experience as a comparativist. However, they can easily be adapted to other subfields, depending on the methodological approaches used by individual faculty.

METHODS COURSES AND THESES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE: A SNAPSHOT

Before setting out to write this article, I looked quickly at a number of political science departments to determine how many required senior theses and/or research methods courses from their majors. Using the most recent rankings in both *US News & World Report* and *Washington Monthly*, I selected the top 125 schools.¹ While this sample is not representative of US colleges and universities, it does represent the top “aspirational” institutions and includes a mix of small liberal arts colleges, private universities, and public universities. Focusing on political science (or equivalent) departments left me with a sample of 118 programs whose major requirements and course offerings I could examine.² I then looked at three simple variables within the program information available through department websites³:

1. Did the program require its majors to write a senior thesis?
2. Did the program require its majors to take a research methods course?
3. Did the program offer a research methods course through the department?

Overall, the findings were not surprising and confirmed my expectations of differences between liberal arts colleges and public universities (see table 1). None of the top-rated political science programs at public universities required students to write a senior thesis, although all of them offered a research methods course. In contrast, more than a fifth of all sampled liberal arts colleges and private universities required a senior thesis, although not all offered a methods course. Additionally, five of the liberal arts colleges that required a methods course did not offer it through the political science or equivalent department, but rather relied on offerings from the economics or mathematics depart-

ments. Across all sampled institutions, there was a greater tendency to offer or require a methods course than to require a senior thesis.

This finding suggests an interesting paradox. The kind of institutions that were most likely to require students to write a thesis were least likely to require or offer research methods courses. In contrast, the programs that were most likely to offer and require research methods courses were least likely to require students

to write a thesis. Both extremes are problematic. In the case in which students must write a thesis but are not required to take a methods course—or, worse, one is simply not offered—the burden falls on the student and his or her advisor to develop appropriate research methods for the thesis. One would hope that research methods would be taught across the discipline’s curriculum, but personal experience suggests this is either unlikely or done in a less-than-systematic fashion. In the case in which students must take a research methods course but are not required to write a senior thesis, I must wonder whether students ever have the experience to demonstrate their knowledge of research methods in a way that goes beyond a test on statistical terminology.

BRINGING METHODS “BACK IN” TO THE CURRICULUM

It has long been a cliché that research methods courses primarily focus on quantitative statistical methods and tend to be taught by Americanists, whose subfield is dominated by such methods. Two recent studies on the state of undergraduate research methods courses do little to dispel that view, although they do provide evidence that nonquantitative methodological “techniques” are recognized as essential to a quality undergraduate understanding of political science methodology. In a survey of methods courses in 106 political science departments, Turner and Thies (2009) find significant consensus about what a methods course is across the discipline: more than 70% of courses covered quantitative analysis, while less than half covered qualitative methods. Although focusing on ways to alleviate student anxieties about methods courses, Bos and Schneider nevertheless note that the methods course in the large midwestern university of their study “fulfilled a liberal arts *mathematical* thinking requirement” (2009, 376, emphasis mine).

Both studies make clear the need for methods courses to do more than merely familiarize students with quantitative analysis techniques. In particular, Bos and Schneider (2009) outline a set of skills that students should learn in methods courses, including generating social science research questions, writing a literature review, and choosing appropriate cases. However, significant numbers of the students they sampled were unfamiliar with some of these essential elements of political science research methods prior to taking an upper-level methods course. If such findings hold for other institutions, they should be cause for significant concern. As a discipline, we recognize that political science should do more than teach students a collection of facts about how governments

work; it should also teach students how to think critically about politics. To engage in such thinking, political science students must gain an understanding of the discipline's methods.

I believe that the scope and methods of our discipline can and should be addressed across the curriculum. There are a number of reasons for using this approach: First, limiting the learning of political science research methods to an individual course gives students little sense of why methods matter across the discipline—particularly if the methods taught in such a course do not seem applicable to the questions raised in other courses. Second, an understanding of the methods used to answer key questions in the various subfields of the discipline gives students a more critical understanding of how those questions have been and continue to be answered by scholars—and how those methods shape “content” courses. If nothing else, this knowledge may help students write better seminar papers, a common requirement in political sciences courses. Third, an understanding of which methods are appropriate to different kinds of questions makes students better consumers of information and gives them the tools to conduct their own independent research, whether in a senior thesis, a semester research paper, or their future professional careers.

TEACHING METHODS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Because the semester research paper is a traditional requirement for many undergraduate political science courses, giving students clear guidance about this assignment is one easy way to incorporate methods teaching into any class.⁴ Clifford Bob (2001) offers excellent advice on how to include this instruction in the classroom. Although his concern is primarily with improving students' critical thinking and research writing, he essentially outlines a way to use the semester research paper to teach students how to “do” political science research—not just write a book report. I have built upon that template over the years, adding additional components meant both to guide students through their papers and to help them develop some of the basic research skills and methods of our discipline. Another resource I have found invaluable is Lisa Baglione's (2007) *Writing a Research Paper in Political Science*, particularly the chapters on finding a research question and writing a literature review. Although numerous reference books on research writing exist, this was the first one to be aimed specifically at political science undergraduates. In addition to the research paper, however, I have found it essential to explicitly introduce in my classes throughout the semester some of the methodological issues my students will face as they work on their research papers.

The following is a list of benchmark skills that I believe can be taught in various “content” courses across the discipline. These skills can either build on students' prior experience in a methods course or serve as precursors to further exploration in an advanced methods course. I provide some examples of how to consciously incorporate each of the following benchmark skills into a non-methods course. Because I am drawing on my own experience, this list is derived from courses in comparative politics and area studies (Latin American politics). Nevertheless, I believe that instructors can easily find appropriate examples for use in their own classes.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Not surprisingly, undergraduate students often have a difficult time coming up with a research question, whether for a senior thesis or for a semester research paper. One problem is that stu-

dents frequently do not appreciate how the discipline is driven by such research “puzzles.” Too often, students seem more interested in learning and cataloging “facts” than understanding the means by which we arrive at the theories that explain observed political reality. This approach translates into final products that better fit the category of a report than a research paper.

Students need constant prodding to think in terms of research questions and develop ones they can then explore on their own. Providing such encouragement might mean framing the course around one (or a few) question(s) that students will explore together throughout the semester. As someone interested in democratization, I regularly use that subject as one of the themes of my introductory-level comparative politics courses. Asking students to think about why some countries are democracies and others are not can be a good way to keep them focused on a research question. Then, as they explore the basic concepts of comparative politics (e.g., states, institutions, political culture) and learn about selected case studies, we can return constantly to such questions.

Requiring students to formulate a concise but clear research question is a powerful exercise. One way to do this is through a multistage semester research paper. While semester or term papers are common assignments in political science courses, students' final products are too often less than satisfactory. In my courses, I have modified Bob's (2001) recommendations to ask students to treat each research paper as a “mini-thesis” and insist that they go through all the steps of a traditional thesis project—though in a briefer, less arduous format. I first require my students to submit a research question, organized as a short, three-sentence statement that clearly states the question, a rationale for why the question is important, and a hypothesis (their “best guess” answer to the question).

This assignment is not graded, but students are not allowed to submit a final research paper until their brief “proposal” has been approved.⁵ Throughout the semester, I use the students' own statements to remind them to stay within the bounds of the course and not stray away from their research question.⁶ For many students, this can be an arduous task, particularly for students more comfortable writing country summaries or thematic essays. For example, a student writing about the effects of the 2001 economic crisis on democracy in Argentina may have to remember that his or her paper probably does not require background information on the Falklands War, the Perón years, or the complexities of Argentine federalism, no matter how interesting or significant these issues might be in answering other research questions. In most cases, however, students come to appreciate that a narrow research question helps guide their research and maintain focus.

Literature Review or Theoretical Framework

Many of the problems that students face writing a literature review stems from their misunderstanding of how secondary sources should be used in the social sciences. Although this understanding is particularly difficult for undergraduates to grasp, most of McMenamin's (2006) observations about difficulties students have in preparing literature reviews for dissertations can be applied to undergraduate work. Whereas the level of work expected of undergraduates should be lower than that expected of advanced graduate students, the three lessons McMenamin outlines are essential at any level: learning to decide what literature to select, learning to read critically, and learning to write critically by transition from “process to text.”

What students often turn in as a semester research paper is primarily a review or summary of some (hopefully relevant) literature on a selected topic. For example, a paper on underdevelopment in Africa will likely cite a handful of books or articles dealing with this issue. Most often, this list will reflect the first set of references located in a library catalog search. Although this is certainly a step in the right direction, such a process frequently produces neither a research paper nor a well-crafted literature review, but rather a summary of the sources used by the particular student. I have found it useful to devote some class time (often a full class period) to explain what a literature review is and its role as a component of a semester research paper. I do not only walk students through the process of selecting articles on their chosen topic, but also remind them to anchor their topic in a broader discussion drawn from key concepts covered in the class itself.

The starting point is the textbook. As a result, the instructor must carefully select a textbook that includes significant discussions about research areas and/or theoretical approaches. Because a basic introduction to comparative politics textbook is often organized thematically, this reference lends itself easily as a starting point for a short literature review. Although my students write research papers on one or two cases, I expect that these examples be grounded by a research question. Each research question can be slotted into one of the chapters or chapter sections (e.g., revolutions, nationalism, underdevelopment). Ironically, this approach has proven to be a greater problem in upper-level courses than in introductory courses. Many area studies textbooks are organized not thematically, but as a series of side-by-side case study chapters. It is thus a challenge to draw a number of themes or research areas (e.g., democratization, populism, indigenous movements). One solution is to place one or more introductory-level textbooks on reserve at the library and suggest that students examine them as a starting point.

I also frequently assign upper-level students at least one review essay (essays that review several books, not just a single book review). Area studies journals often include many such excellent essays, which not only do an excellent job of summarizing recent literature in a given field (and are therefore useful as a stand-alone introduction to an area not adequately covered in the textbook), but also serve as models for how students can go beyond a mere summary of their selected sources' key arguments to critically and relationally evaluate them and come to some independent conclusion about their own position within a scholarly debate. Whenever I assign a review essay, I set aside significant time for explicit discussion of how students can use this format as a model for their own literature reviews.

Students are required to include in their research paper a clearly labeled literature review or theoretical framework section in which they discuss at least two perspectives on their research area, which need not necessarily be drawn from their cases. I remind my students that the rest of their research paper should fit within the debate outlined in their literature review and should try to resolve that debate. This section can take several forms. Perhaps a student is trying to explain why a country has failed to achieve sustained economic growth. In the literature review, I would expect him or her to outline at least two theoretical perspectives that explain why some countries achieve economic growth while others fail to do so. The paper should then describe a case, focusing on the criteria developed by the two competing perspectives, and try to determine—based on available evidence—which of the com-

peting theories best explains that particular case. Alternatively, a student might be attempting to determine whether a particular Latin American leader is a populist or not. To do so, he or she would have to include a summary of the various definitions of populism in the literature review. The remainder of the paper would then focus on the question of whether the chosen political leader met the criteria of a “populist” as set out in the literature. In either case, the literature review serves as an anchor for the research paper, linking the research question to subsequent sections.

Unlike other components of the research paper, I do not require my students to submit a draft literature review prior to submission of the final research paper,⁷ primarily because I realize that literature reviews are time-consuming and will likely be developed throughout the semester. However, I do require my students to submit a brief (one paragraph) “theoretical framework” statement, bundled with the “research design and case selection” statement described in the next section, early in the semester. My main expectation for the theoretical framework statement is that the student identify two or three competing schools of thought as relevant to his or her project and provide a sentence stating which approach he or she finds most convincing. This last requirement forces students to take a stand in a disciplinary debate.

Research Design and Case Selection

Issues of research design are often intertwined with the literature review and often depend on whether the student is writing a single case study, an explicitly comparative study, or a large-*N* analysis. In my comparative politics courses, I regularly require my students to write a comparative study of two cases. I do this to reinforce the idea that comparative politics is defined not by the fact that it covers non-American politics, but by its central attachment to the comparative method. I also adopt this approach because students do seem to enjoy and have a priori interests in and familiarity with single-case studies (which lend themselves to traditional “report” writing). Requiring a comparative analysis of two cases forces students to think about the comparative method explicitly.

I require students to base their research paper on a comparative study of two cases within the framework of the two “classic” types of comparative studies identified by Przeworski and Teune (1970): most-similar systems (MSS) and most-different systems (MDS). This framework gives students an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the most basic methodological tool of comparative politics. Students are free to select their cases and the kind of comparative study they wish to pursue. Such an approach does put a burden on the instructor to shepherd students through their research papers, especially to make sure that students are selecting appropriate cases. The results, however, have sometimes been quite impressive.

As a step toward the final research paper, I ask students to write a brief research design statement (usually one to two paragraphs) that explicitly justifies their case selection and defines their research design (either MDS or MSS). As with the earlier research question assignment, students are not allowed to submit a final research paper until their research design and case selection have been approved.

Concepts, Variables, and Data Sources

As they move forward with their papers, I ask students to clearly define their concepts, variables, and data. Students often have an

easier time thinking and writing about concepts than working with variables. However, a key element of the research paper assignment asks students to explicitly connect their concepts to variables—that is, to *operationalize* their concepts. For some concepts (e.g., revolution) this process may be relatively easy, but for others (e.g., development) this may be very difficult. Students often have a difficult time locating publicly available data or incorporating them into a research paper. However, the ability to locate data relevant to a research question is an invaluable skill that translates into postgraduate professional careers.

Asking students to write a research paper that links concepts, variables, and data requires instructors to pay careful attention to these connections in the classroom throughout the semester. I constantly remind myself to use the language of concepts and variables during class discussions. I also must remind (or teach) students the various kinds of variables that can be used (ordinal, nominal, categorical, or scale). A simple class exercise for almost any text (e.g., textbook, article, film) is to ask students to briefly outline the concepts and variables that the author uses. A more adventurous approach is to initiate a class discussion about whether the variables are “appropriate” or “accurately” measure the underlying concept. This exercise has the added benefit of helping students read their text critically and distinguish opinions about politics from scholarly claims based on evidence.

My approach to explicitly integrating research methods into my non-methods courses faces the same limitations that I have encountered in many methods courses. After looking at numerous sample syllabi, reviewing potential textbooks, and reflecting on my own undergraduate experience, I was struck by the realization that while courses paid substantial attention to the *analysis* of data, little (if any) attention was paid to the *collection* of data. Instead, many textbooks and syllabi developed statistical exercises based on an existing dataset, such as the American National Election Study (ANES). Although such exercises are excellent for teaching students various statistical techniques, they are confined to the subfield of American politics and do little to help students wrestle with the issue of data collection, coding, and application.

In my methods course, we devote significant attention to non-statistical techniques, such as elite interviews, participant observation (“soaking and poking”), and content analysis. The goal is to give students the tools they need to develop a successful senior thesis or similar research project. A non-methods course offers only limited time for instruction on how to personally gather data for a research project—which is one reason why methods courses should be sure to explore such issues. My personal experience in both overseeing theses (mostly in Latin American studies) and participating in thesis defenses has brought me to the conclusion that most students who write theses do not actually use statistical analysis. Many theses come from other subfields of political science: area studies, international relations, and political theory. Such students typically rely on comparative analysis, careful case studies, interviews, textual analysis, or reflections on their study

Table 2

Suggested Template for a Comparative Politics Research Paper

| SECTION | COMPONENTS | LENGTH (PAGES) |
|------------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Introduction | Research question, rationale, and hypothesis | 1 |
| Literature Review | Discussion of 2–3 competing schools of thought | 2–4 |
| Case Selection and Research Design | Introduce cases and specify MSS or MDS research design; define concepts, variables, and data sources | 2–3 |
| Analysis | Discussion of results | 3–4 |

abroad experiences (in which carefully thought-out “soaking and poking” can play an effective role). I would encourage departments to look at their own theses, if they have them, and ask whether and how students learned the techniques used in their senior theses.

In my non-methods courses, I make a concerted effort to present students with appropriate data sources for their research papers. This entails not only pointing students to resources such as the Human Development Index or the Failed States Index, but also setting aside class discussions to address the importance of and controversies surrounding various data sources. This attention can range from the most minimal discussion about the importance of critically evaluating the sources of data to the more complex question of resolving differences between competing and contradictory data sources. Such discussions have the added benefit of helping students become critical consumers of information, a key goal of a liberal arts education.

The key point of this section is that I require students to use some kind of data in their research papers. As a result, in addition to citing relevant literature, students are expected to draw on primary data sources whenever possible. I do not, however, expect introductory-level students to use sophisticated statistical techniques. Students often use national election results, public opinion data, or economic indicators taken from reputable online sources.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE FINAL RESEARCH PRODUCT

The final research paper that my students typically turn in is between 10 and 15 pages (longer in an upper-level course, shorter in an intro-level course). In the guidelines, I make it clear that the paper must be divided into subheadings (see table 2): introduction (which states the research question), literature review, case selection and research design (which includes a discussion of variables and data sources), and analysis or discussion. My students often remark that this structure leaves little room for discussion of the many “interesting things” about their cases. After they get past the introduction (roughly one page), the literature review (two to four pages), and the research design (two to three pages), most of the remainder of the paper is left for analysis. The constraints of the assignment make it difficult for students to write long sections of prose summarizing the interesting facts about their cases and make these papers easier to grade, because each section is clearly labeled and can be spot-checked.

A number of additional elements can be incorporated into this assignment. Like Bob (2001), whenever practicable, I set aside at least one class period for peer review. This activity has a number

of benefits: Students must produce a draft for peer review and must therefore start their final draft earlier. Students also often gain valuable insights from small peer-review groups. However, these advantages come at the cost of time that could be devoted to important substantive material.

Another element that I like to incorporate is an oral presentation, which allows students who may be better at nonwritten forms of communication to exercise their skills. In upper-level classes, I often set aside a week for students to deliver five- to 10-minute presentations (typically using PowerPoint) to the class, allowing a minute or two for questions and comments. Obviously, this approach is not feasible in extremely large classes. I also find it useful to require students to give their oral presentations at least one week before the final paper is due. This schedule allows students to incorporate comments from their presentation into their final paper.

CONCLUSION

Explicitly incorporating research methods into non-methods courses adds value to the undergraduate political science experience. First, this approach reminds students that political science is a discipline defined by methods of study. Students should, for example, be able to distinguish between a political science and a history course on Latin America. Second, exposure to different kinds of methodological approaches and concerns throughout the undergraduate curriculum better prepares students for later advanced studies in research methods. Third, such an approach makes it clear to students that methods matter to the discipline and are relegated neither to a single subfield (American politics) nor to specifically defined methodologists. Finally, regardless of whether students pursue graduate studies in political science, a solid understanding of research methods and practical experience with research writing is a valuable professional skill.

The approach sketched out in this brief reflective article suggests that carefully structured, methodologically conscious research paper assignments—and courses explicitly organized around them—can contribute to the teaching of research methods across the undergraduate political science curriculum. Although my approach is explicitly drawn from my experience as a comparativist, I think that it translates easily into courses in American politics and international relations. Courses in political theory would, of course, need to be structured differently. Nevertheless, it would be valuable for students to learn the methods of inquiry used in theory, and how these methods are both different from and similar to the methods used in other subfields. The result of my research paper approach, when successful, has been that students write research papers with a clearly articulated research question that is anchored in a well-defined body of literature and uses appropriate data to discuss particular cases. Ideally, the product is a condensed form of what most of us would recognize as a senior thesis. Moreover, students (it is hoped) come away from both the research paper and the overall class experience with an understanding not only of the subject matter, but also of the methods political scientists use to study that subject.

An important caveat is that research paper assignments are not the only way to design a methods-conscious approach to non-methods courses in political science. Shorter assignments, including those drawn from problem-based pedagogy, can serve equally well in the classroom. Recently, class-size pressures have forced me to abandon the research paper assignment in my introduction

to comparative politics courses. In its place, I now assign a series of shorter (two to three pages) assignments that ask students to reflect on selected materials (e.g., the annual Failed States Index issue of *Foreign Policy* or “Sick Around the World,” a PBS documentary on health care policies in advanced industrial democracies). However, I make sure that the assignment requires students to anchor their reflection in the relevant theoretical discussion in the textbook, select two cases for comparison, and apply the provided data to their analysis. Often, these assignments also require them to apply their analysis to a real-world example, writing documents such as a brief policy statement to a development agency with recommendations for solving a key problem facing a failed state or a memo to their congressional representative on health care reform. The bottom line, however, is that political science undergraduates should be expected to successfully complete their major having developed a basic understanding of the methods used in the field, the ability to find and critically evaluate evidence, and practical experience applying these skills in original work. ■

NOTES

1. My sample did not include the military service academies.
2. Six schools did not have a major in political science or an equivalent department. Two others (Georgetown and Harvard) did not post information on their department website that would allow me to determine their major requirements or course offerings.
3. Clearly, a better approach would have been to construct a more detailed set of variables to include in either a survey of department chairs or a more in-depth analysis of department programs. However, time and resource constraints compelled me to adopt this more limited procedure.
4. I am aware that a significant and possibly growing number of faculty do not require research papers in their courses, relying instead on in-class exams and perhaps some additional short writing assignments. One additional implicit argument of this article is that research writing should be a key component of the political science undergraduate curriculum.
5. The approval of the mini-proposal can be a multistage process itself. Because students may not be familiar with course subject matter early in the semester, these brief statements often require substantial—and even repeated—revisions. However, the disadvantage of potentially “locking” students in to research projects they may later wish to abandon are outweighed by the benefit of forcing them to begin work on their projects early.
6. I do allow students to revise or even formulate a new research question later in the semester, based on mutual consultation.
7. Not requiring this component is partly a function of class size. When I have been fortunate enough to teach small sections (usually specialized topics courses), I have required students to submit a draft literature review several weeks before submission of the final product.

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