

ABIGAIL S. POST

Teaching Philosophy

My fundamental goal as a teacher is for my students to develop into lifelong learners—who are employed after college. To the first point, I want them to realize that learning continues after the final exam. I teach them to resist a closed mindset. To my second point, my approach is tempered by a pragmatic understanding of the realities of the job market. I teach my students the skills necessary to excel outside of college. My teaching philosophy entails three components/objectives to achieve this dual goal: guiding students to fairly evaluate opposing ideas, providing a foundation of knowledge that allows them to make sense of complex ideas in both domestic and international politics, and giving them real-life critical thinking skills.

I challenge my students to analyze their opinions and respectfully consider others' beliefs. For one, I always make it a point to assign readings for discussion that present different perspectives and challenge students' existing conceptions. For example, in one seminar class my students read various perspectives about the U.S. internment of Japanese citizens during WWII in the context of contemporary U.S. human rights policy. I could see the students throughout the discussion trying to reconcile this historical fact with their beliefs in American exceptionalism. I find that students from all backgrounds are more likely to express their viewpoints, no matter how undeveloped they may be, if everyone is trying to learn. In larger classes, I tend to introduce contentious topics a bit later in the semester after students have become more comfortable with one another. To that end, I often rely on a rotating, team-based approach in larger classes. Students work in groups of 3-4 until they have gotten to know a majority of the class. After that, I introduce topics like systemic racism, U.S. foreign policy failures, and issues related to gay rights and abortion in the United States. The primary benefit of this is that students learn to appreciate diverse views. The secondary benefit of this process is class participation. With this approach, I can get anywhere from 80-100% of the class participating by the end of the semester.

I teach my students the frameworks to tackle political problems long after college. I firmly believe that students must understand political science research methodology in order to evaluate political science research, claims in media, and discussions with colleagues. I want students to learn not only course content but also the skills to evaluate content and be able to teach themselves long after my course is over. When I teach my research methods class, I guide my students to conduct original research on a topic of their choosing using scholarly sources and quantitative data. Additionally, I introduce students in all my classes to basic research methodology so that they can evaluate research utilizing experimental methods, advanced quantitative analysis, and game theoretic models. I often focus class discussions on qualitative papers in my introductory classes, insisting that the students look for the theoretical predictions before evaluating the evidence provided in the case study. For more advanced undergraduate students, I provide assignments that have students identify both empirical and theoretical puzzles in the literature in order to build their own research agenda. This process helps students develop a foundation of knowledge regarding important political phenomena that they can then apply to other societal developments.

Finally, I prepare my students to work for different types of employers. Many of my students desire a career in national security (intelligence analyst, case officer, etc.) and accordingly need to learn to be brief, clear, and objective in their written and verbal communication. In my Intelligence and Security Studies class, for example, each student must regularly brief me on their assigned area of expertise in 90 seconds or less. During these sessions, I roleplay as a different leader, often making outlandish demands and criticisms of their initial delivery. They must back up their claims with solid evidence and reasoning—and also learn when it is best to say, “I don’t know, let me do more research on that.” They learn to tailor their work to their audience, while also making sure that the facts remain the same. In another class, students write brief (less than 1000 words) policy memos in teams of 4-5. They must target their memo to a specific member of the policy community (usually a low-level bureaucrat) and come up with concrete ideas to get at the problem. The team aspect of the report reflects reality in think tanks and other jobs. Since there are fewer assignments to grade with team assignments, I can provide detailed feedback, helping them address the underlying assumptions of their analysis. Watching their writing and analysis improve throughout the semester affirms this approach.

At its core, I believe in holistic teaching, which means that I mentor students in and out of the classroom on issues both close to and unrelated to my discipline. Some students come into the major knowing exactly what they want to do; for these students, my goal is to find them opportunities that maximize their chances at that career. Other students find politics interesting but are unsure what their career might look like; my goal for these students is to identify opportunities that will help them figure out a path. I am a first generation college student who worked full-time on my dad’s farm until college, so I identify with those students who are unsure of their path forward. In addition to disciplinary content, all of my courses include some form of professional development. This includes resume building, elevator speeches, training on LinkedIn and social media, and interview tips. For example, in my introductory classes, I hold a workshop to get students started with their resumes. I meet individually with students throughout their time at college to further develop their document. I also view self-care and time management as crucial aspects of student education. Due to the stress of college, I make it a point to discuss mental health at the beginning of and throughout each semester and design my courses with an appreciation of the stress they are under. Students admit that my classes are challenging but appreciate the way I design them in a way that the semester is front-loaded, allowing them to ease up in my classes when other classes are ramping up.

Every class I teach has dual learning outcomes. I reflect before, during, and after teaching: Is this class going to help students think critically? How will this class help students get jobs during this difficult time? I am transparent with students about this point, regularly reminding them of why we are covering a certain topic or skill. While I have had high levels of success with my tactics, I am always seeking new and innovative methodology to accomplish my teaching goals. By creating a challenging yet welcoming environment, my students emerge from my classes more receptive to diverse opinions and cognizant of their developing skillsets. These skills include, at a minimum, the ability to deliberate in a reasoned, considerate manner; critical thinking and communication; and a better understanding of the world.