

# Examining the Impact of the Wahlke Report: Surveying the Structure of the Political Science Curricula at Liberal Arts and Sciences Colleges and Universities in the Midwest

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In recent years, sparked by the path-breaking reports issued by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) in 1991 (Wahlke 1991), the political science profession has paid an increasing amount of attention to the relationship between the structure of the political science major and student learning outcomes. A few studies have recently sought to examine this relationship empirically (Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama 2001; Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003; Ishiyama and Breuning 2003). However, these studies have focused largely on using the political science curriculum as an independent variable (i.e., affecting student outcomes) and in most cases have been limited to one or two institutions (with the exception of Ishiyama 2004). No study has broadly and systematically examined variations in curricular design across several institutions, nor has any study examined which factors affect how institutions have structured their majors in the way they have.<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses this dearth by broadly surveying a number of liberal arts and sciences colleges and universities across 10 Midwestern states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin) to determine how many political science programs structure their majors in ways according to the recommendations made by the Wahlke report.

## Literature

Since 1991, organizations and individuals in and outside of the political science community have made several recommendations regarding the structure of the political science major. Most noteworthy were the reports issued by the AACU on the Liberal Arts and Sciences and the report produced by the APSA Task Force on Political Science (Wahlke 1991; see also Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama 2001; Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003). These reports are

very critical of unstructured programs. The AACU report argued that only a consciously structured major that entails sequential learning promotes the development of the “building blocks of knowledge that lead to more sophisticated understanding” and critical thinking skills (AACU 1991, 24). The development of such thinking skills cannot be accomplished “merely by cumulative exposure to more and more . . . subject matter” (AACU 1991, 24). Majors which emphasize breadth at the expense of depth result in “shallow learning unless students also grasp the assumptions, arguments, approaches, and controversies that have shaped particular claims and findings” (Wahlke 1991, 49).

Among the many recommendations made by the APSA task force report, three in particular stand out:

1. The undergraduate political science major should entail an integrated and sequential course of study rather than a disconnected set of individual courses. Such an integrated curriculum provides for sequential learning, with the knowledge acquired in one course extended and developed in a subsequent course. A broad-based, common introductory course to the major for incoming freshmen is a necessary first step to this sequence of learning.
2. The goal of the curriculum is to familiarize students with the assumptions, methods, and analytical approaches of the discipline. This does not mean requiring that political science students take statistics. Rather, students should be exposed to the broad contours and logic of social scientific inquiry and familiar with the assumptions, methods, and analytical approaches of the discipline (Wahlke 1991, 52). This recommendation requires that students enroll in a course on research design and methodology, preferably fairly early in their collegiate career.
3. The curriculum should culminate in a “capstone experience” or equivalent (Wahlke 1991, 52). This capstone course, such as a senior seminar or a senior experience (not merely a senior thesis), should provide a broad synthesis of what the student has learned during the course of the major, while offering a strong sense of the context of different fields toward a greater appreciation of their methodological strengths and weaknesses.

Evidence has emerged in recent years that illustrates the benefits of just such a structured and sequenced political science major. A few studies have suggested a link between curriculum structure and learning outcomes. Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama (2001), for instance, demonstrated the value a structured and sequenced curriculum has in promoting student learning. Other works suggest a relationship between the structure of majors and the development of abstract and critical reasoning skills. Ishiyama and Hartlaub (2003), in comparing two similar institutions, found that graduates from a structured program are better at developing abstract and critical thinking skills, and are better prepared for graduate and professional education. Further, Ishiyama (2004, forthcoming), in a survey of 32 colleges and universities, found a very strong relationship between the degree to which a political science major program is structured and student knowledge, even when controlling for plausible alternative explanations for student performance. The results support the notion that majors that are characterized by a sequenced set of courses, the existence of a senior seminar or capstone course, and a required research methodology course taken early in a student's career better prepare political science students than do relatively unstructured majors.

To what extent, then, do liberal arts programs at smaller colleges and

universities in the Midwest follow these recommended characteristics?

## Method

To assess the various programs I first consulted the Carnegie classification system and identified the masters I, masters II, and primarily baccalaureate liberal arts institutions from 10 states in the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin) as the focus of this study. In total, I examined 285 institutions, out of which 193 (or 67.7%) reported offering a political science major.<sup>2</sup> (See [www.apsanet.org/ps/jan05/ishiyamalist/](http://www.apsanet.org/ps/jan05/ishiyamalist/) for list of schools. For description of the methodology see the Appendix).

To investigate the structure of the political science majors at these 193 colleges and universities, I examined the web sites of the respective institutions. Since many students narrow down their choice of colleges by examining their web sites as a prelude (or sometimes alternative) to a campus visit, web sites are becoming an important tool for universities to advertise and explain their majors. While deriving data from college and university web sites may have its limitations (such as the inability to distinguish between what is officially listed on the catalog as opposed to what is actually practiced in class) it also provides important insights into each university's offerings, and is an efficient way to gather comparative data. Although the actual content of a course may differ from its description on a college or university catalog, the fact that a program does not publicly advertise structure indicates a lesser degree of commitment to a structured major. Similarly, if a program publicly advertises structure, then it indicates at least some commitment to the concept of a structured political science major. Thus, reliance on data gleaned from course catalogs represents a relatively efficient means to attain data on whether programs are committed to adopting the recommendations of the AACU and APSA task force recommendations.

## Results

Table 1 reports some basic institutional characteristics, as well as characteristics of the political science majors for the 193 colleges and universities studied (for a full discussion of the methods employed see Appendix). Most of the schools were private (71.5% of

**Table 1**  
**General Features of Institutions and Political Science Programs**

Public/Private	Public	Private
	28.5% (55)	71.5% (138)
Combined Department?	Combined	Independent Political Science Department
	32.6% (63)	67.4% (130)
More or Most Selective in Freshman Admissions	Yes	No
	36.3% (70)	63.7% (123)
Required Common Introductory Course	Yes	No
	82.9% (160)	17.1% (33)
Methodology Required Early	Yes	No
	46.6% (90)	53.4% (103)
Senior Seminar/Capstone Experience	Yes	No
	39.9% (77)	60.1% (116)

the total) and most of the political science departments were independent (67.4% of the total), meaning they were not combined with other disciplines to form a department (such as history or sociology, for example). Most of the political science programs required a common introductory course (82.9%), less than half (46.6%) required a research methodology course, and even fewer (only 39.9%) required a senior seminar/capstone course. Even more striking is how few (18.1% or 35 of 193) of the programs employed all three structure characteristics (common introductory course, required research methodology, and a senior capstone course). Thus, it appears that only a small minority of the political science programs surveyed in this study met the minimal structural recommendations made in the Wahlke report.

Table 3 shows that political science programs most commonly require only a common introductory class (30.0% of the sample), followed by departments that require both a common introductory course and a research methodology course (21.2%). These patterns were often characterized by "distributional" requirements, where students had the

option of taking courses from required fields in addition to a common introductory course and a methods course.

Table 4 reports the overall number of required courses (which may or may not include a common introductory level course, a research methods course, or a senior capstone course). Departments that require majors to take between four to five common courses (71 or 36.8% of the total) are followed by programs that require two to three common courses (31.6% or 61). Only 21 departments, or 10.9%, required six courses or more.

Which institutional features are associated with variations in political science program curricular design? Table 5 reports the results of a logit analysis where the dependent variable is defined as the number of structure characteristics identified in Table 2. This is regressed against several "independent" variables, the size of the department (defined by the number of FTE political science faculty), the institution's reported student/faculty ratio, whether the institution was private or public, whether the political science program was administratively housed in a "combined" department, and whether the institution was classified as "more" or "most" selective by *US News and World Report*.

As indicated in Table 5, there is no discernable relationship between the size of the department (political science FTE), the student/faculty ratio, and the extent to which a political science major is structured. In addition, no difference exists when comparing the structure of political science departments at private and public institutions. Further, an institution's classification as either most or more selective was unrelated to the structure of its political science program. The only independent

**Table 2**  
**Percent of Schools with Number of Structure Characteristics**

Structure Characteristics	Percentage (n)
0	6.2% (12)
1	36.3% (70)
2	39.4% (76)
3	18.1% (35)

**Table 3**  
**Percent of Schools with various program combinations**

Structure Characteristics	Percentage (n)
No structure characteristics	6.2% (12)
Intro Only	30.0% (54)
Methods Only	4.7% (9)
Capstone Only	3.6% (7)
Intro and Methods	21.2% (41)
Intro and Capstone	15.5% (30)
Methods and Capstone	2.5% (5)
All three structure characteristics	18.1% (35)

**Table 4**  
**Number of Required Political Science Courses in the Major**

Required Common Courses	Percentage (n)
No Required Common Courses	4.7% (9)
1 Required Course	16.1% (31)
2-3 Required Courses	31.6% (61)
4-5 Required Courses	36.8% (71)
6 or more Required Courses	10.9% (21)

variable that exhibited a statistically significant relationship with the structure characteristics dependent variable was whether the political science program is administratively housed in a "combined" department. The sign of the coefficient ( $-.67$ ) indicates that political science programs that are administratively housed in combined departments are significantly less likely to be structured than political science programs housed in exclusively political science departments.

This finding makes some sense. There is likely much greater pressure in a combined department to relax certain requirements (in many cases, methodology) to make the political science major more congruent with its shared other discipline (such as history, which was the most often major combined with political science). It may also be the case that political science faculty recruited into combined departments are more inclined toward a vision of political science as an eclectic and flexible discipline, a vision that may militate against the adoption of curricular structures that (to many) may resemble a straight jacket.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study was designed primarily to survey the political science programs of 193 Midwestern colleges and universities to ascertain the extent to which

they conformed to the minimal structural features recommended by the Wahlke and AACU reports. In sum, only a small proportion of programs have adopted the structural recommendations of those reports. This finding is quite surprising (and somewhat troubling). Why don't undergraduate institutions in the Midwest (a region where the emphasis on systematic and quantitative approaches to political science is quite popular) follow even the minimal structural characteristics of these reports?

It is far too early to present a full explanation here, but some of the results hint at answers. Perhaps the struc-

ture of political science programs has to do with departmental characteristics. For instance, the finding that political science programs that were administratively housed in combined departments were less likely to be structured than those housed in single discipline political science departments, suggests that introducing a structured curriculum in combined departments may face special challenges. This finding has some potentially important implications. For instance, the recent budgetary problems facing many colleges and universities may increase the proportion of institutions which combine their political science programs with other disciplines, with the result that even fewer schools will follow the Wahlke recommendations in the future.

On the other hand, the fact that the institutional variables identified had little to do with whether political science programs are structured along the lines of the Wahlke report (especially with so little of the variance in the programs explained by the model, with the pseudo  $r$ -square at .04) may suggest other reasons. For instance, it may be that political science programs find the recommendations either inappropriate to their institutions, or difficult to implement. Or it may be that political scientists at small liberal arts and sciences institutions are wholly unaware of the Wahlke report. Examining these and other explanations, however, will have to await further qualitative analysis (e.g., interviewing programs that did not choose to follow the recommendations of these reports). Such research really has to wait for a full review of the impact of the Wahlke report.

Over a dozen years later, there is little evidence to suggest that the recommendations made by the AACU and Wahlke reports have been widely

**Table 5**  
**Coefficient Estimates, Logit analysis (dependent variable = number of structure characteristics listed in Table 2)**

	Coefficient (standard Error)
FTE Political Science Faculty	-.06 (.05)
Student/Faculty Ratio	-.05 (.06)
Private School Dummy	-.68 (.48)
Combined Department	-.66* (.31)
Selective Dummy	.24 (.30)

N = 193.

\*  $p \leq .05$ .

pseudo  $r^2 = .04$ .

adopted by their primary audience: undergraduate, liberal arts institu-

tions. It is time for political scientists to revisit the issue of how the

political science major should be structured.

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## Notes

1. For some recent studies that have surveyed graduate programs in political science, see Hesli, Fink, and Duffy (2003); Schwartz-Shea (2003).

2. A Political Science Major was defined as including majors listed as "political science," "politics," "government," and "po-

litical science and international relations." Not included were combination majors (such as "History and Political Science" and "Politics and Sociology") nor were interdisciplinary majors with a concentration in political science. This is because the Wahlke report did not speak directly to these majors, and

we can thus expect them to be structured very differently than purely political science majors.

3. Departments that were listed as "Political Science and International Relations" were coded as Political Science Departments, given their common genealogy.

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## APPENDIX: Methodology

Each college and university that had a political science major was coded for both characteristics of the major and of the institution. The major characteristics that were coded included whether or not the political science major had: (1) a common introductory course that was required of all majors; (2) a research methodology course; (3) a senior seminar or capstone course.

The first characteristic, the presence of a common introductory course that was required of all majors, was coded as a "1" if an introductory freshmen level course to political science, introduction to American government, or world politics, was included in the required curriculum. In some cases, students were afforded a number of choices or introductory "tracks" (often differentiating between American politics and "world" politics—a euphemism, no doubt, for comparative politics and international relations). However, under such circumstances students are not exposed to a common introductory course to "political science"—contradicting the recommendations made regarding the creation of a "structured" major. If this were the case then it was coded as a "0."

The second characteristic, the presence of a research methodology course taken relatively early in a student's career, was coded as a "1" if a research methods course was included *and* it was listed as a third-year level course or less. This could include a non-political science course, as long as it exposed students to the logic of social science research. On the other hand, a major that merely required students to take a statistics course does not necessarily require students be exposed to the logic of empirical political analysis or research design. Thus, if a major required that a student take a research methods course, and this was listed as at least a junior-level course or lower (e.g., 300 level or below) then this was coded as a "1." Otherwise it was coded a "0." This is because if a research methods course is listed as a fourth-year course or higher then it signals to the student that this course can be taken only near the end of a student's undergraduate education.

The third characteristic, whether the curriculum included a senior seminar or capstone course, was coded as a "1" if a clearly defined capstone course was identified (such as a senior seminar course) in the political science section in the undergraduate catalog. This did not include a senior thesis or directed research, because, although undergraduate research promotes valuable skills for any student, such activities are not consciously designed to provide a broad synthesis of what the student has learned during the course of the major. A capstone experience should provide an opportunity for the student to get a strong sense of the context of different subfields in political science, and to appreciate their methodological strengths and weaknesses. A senior thesis experience is not generally designed to accomplish these goals.

From these separate indicators, I created a composite measure of curricular structure (by simply adding the number of structure characteristics). I did so because the Wahlke report emphasized these characteristics as part of an integrated curricular package (so it would make little sense to analyze each characteristic individually). As to the institutional characteristics, data were collected on the number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) faculty lines that were available for the political science program (as an indicator of the size of the program). In addition, to get some sense of the size of the school relative to the number of faculty, I also collected data on student/faculty ratios. Third, I coded whether or not the political science program was administratively housed in a "combined" department (such as a Department of History and Political Science or a Department of Social Science, or Behavioral Sciences).<sup>3</sup> This provided some indication as to the relative freedom political scientists have to construct their own curriculum. Fourth, I coded a private school dummy variable, to determine if a difference existed between private and public schools in the level of structure in their relative political science programs. Finally, in order to discern the "quality" of the institution, I created a dummy variable of whether or not the institution was classified as "most or more selective," which was coded as "1" for schools that were listed as either most or more selective, and "0" if otherwise by *America's Best Colleges* (US News and World Report, 2000). I used this measure rather than other indicators of quality (such as faculty research productivity) because: (1) unlike other measures this was a classification officially ascribed to the institution as opposed to being created based upon subjective indicators and; (2) these institutions are more likely to market themselves as quality teaching institutions, rather than research institutions.