

New And Upper Level Political Science Course Preparations: A Discussion Of Challenges And Opportunities At The Teaching-Oriented Institution

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ABSTRACT

Designing and executing a new upper level political science course preparation can be a daunting task, especially when dealing with some of the challenges in the context of teaching-oriented institutions of higher learning. In this paper, I conduct an examination of both the challenges and the opportunities that can be afforded by environmental factors associated with teaching-oriented colleges and universities. I base some of this information on my experience of preparing and executing a new upper level political science course preparation in the fall of 2009. First, I briefly examine some of the challenges that instructors are likely to encounter in smaller college environments when executing new upper level course preparations. Next, I discuss some potential advantages and opportunities that various elements of a teaching-oriented environment can offer instructors who are faced with new upper level course preparations. Finally, I explore how instructors can maximize their chances of experiencing the benefits while avoiding some of the drawbacks of preparing new upper level courses in the teaching institution environment. A closer examination of the advantages and opportunities associated with executing new upper level course preparations at relatively small teaching institutions will help instructors develop awareness of more effective ways to design courses so that both instructor effectiveness and student learning can be maximized.

Keywords: New Course Preparation; Teaching-Oriented Institution; Teaching Load; Class Size; Advising Strategies

INTRODUCTION

College instructors deal with the undertaking of new course preparations throughout their teaching careers. However, it is commonly understood that the practice, or perhaps better stated, the “art” of developing new course preparations is not to be taken lightly. While potentially exciting and rewarding, executing a new course preparation often proves to be a very complex, demanding, and time-consuming endeavor. Depending on the particular circumstances under which a new course preparation is taught, the experience could end up being a successful yet exhausting one at best or an unsuccessful and unfulfilling one at worst.

Research shows that a wide range of factors can affect the outcome of course preparations in general (see Davis 2009 for review). Some of these factors are however related to the contextual environment of the institution of learning—namely, whether or not the institution is teaching-oriented. This paper explores both some of the challenges and opportunities associated with preparing and executing new upper level political science course preparations in the context of relatively small teaching-oriented institutions of higher learning. In the first section of the paper, I outline and discuss some of the commonly encountered challenges associated with preparing and executing new upper level course preparations in the context of relatively small teaching-oriented institutions. Next, I outline and discuss some of the potential advantages and opportunities for preparing new upper level course preparations that may be associated with the environment of teaching-oriented institutions. Finally, in the last

section, I discuss some of the tactics that instructors can use in order to maximize their chances of avoiding some of the challenges while experiencing some of the opportunities and benefits offered by the teaching-oriented institution's environment.

Purpose

Given the heavy teaching loads at most teaching-oriented institutions, most instructors who work in such environments will teach a large number of course preparations, all of which will be "new" at some point throughout their careers. Not only will these instructors encounter the normal issues associated with teaching new course preparations, but they will also be likely to encounter additional layers of challenges that are oftentimes by-products of the teaching-oriented environment. On the other hand, there are features afforded by the environment of teaching-oriented institutions that could provide special opportunities and advantages for the process of preparing new upper level course preparations. Many instructors receive their first experiences in teaching new course preparations from research universities while they work towards completing their advanced degrees. However, research has shown that a majority of those with doctorates in political science who are employed in institutions of higher learning work in departments that lack doctoral programs and are more oriented towards teaching than research (Nerad, 2003). Consequently, it is easy to understand how many of these new instructors find themselves unprepared for the particular conglomeration of challenges that accompany developing and executing new course preparations at smaller teaching oriented institutions.

Some of the information that I refer to in this paper pertains to my experience of having prepared and implemented a new political science upper level course preparation—Political Psychology—in fall of 2009. The total enrollment in the Political Psychology course was about a dozen students, all of whom were either juniors or seniors. Preparing new and/or upper level courses in political science and in many other disciplines can be especially challenging due to a variety of conditions, some of which exist regardless of whether the course is prepared in a teaching-oriented institutional setting or not. For instance, with regard to Political Psychology, as is the case for some other relatively specialized upper level political science courses, there are not many textbooks or readers that are readily accessible to undergraduate classes containing students with very diverse levels of academic preparedness. Instead, many of the readings are geared towards either advanced upper level undergraduates or graduate students.

The main goal of this paper is to identify and explore some of those challenges and opportunities associated with the environment of teaching-oriented colleges and universities that the instructors of new upper level political science course preparations are likely to encounter. There are many reasons that underscore the importance of such a project. First, developing an awareness of the range of challenges and opportunities that one can encounter when developing and executing new course preparations can (1) assist instructors in engaging in strategic planning decisions as to the best time to teach new course preparations (2) assist instructors who lack experience in designing new courses in teaching oriented-environments by educating them on the challenges associated with such contexts, and (3) assist instructors in developing awareness of more effective ways to design courses so that both instructor effectiveness and student learning are maximized.

DISCUSSION

Challenges of Preparing and Executing New Upper Level Courses

Teaching Load

The heavy teaching load, which typically ranges from six to eight or more courses a year at teaching-oriented colleges and universities (Hanley, 2008), presents a multitude of challenges which should not be ignored when designing a new upper level course preparation. Generally speaking, the heavier the teaching load across an academic year of a new course preparation, the less the amount of time and energy the instructor will have to devote to each individual course, including the new course preparation. The weight of the teaching load should be considered on the bases of at least the following factors: the number of courses taught per semester, the number of different course preparations taught per semester, and the number of different course preparations taught over the

academic year. Further, an interaction between teaching load (in terms of course load) and the total number of students that accompany the teaching load should be an additional consideration when calculating the total effect that teaching load will have on the time and attention available to devote to a new preparation.

Class Size

The class size of the new upper level course that one is preparing to execute is likely to have a huge impact on both the planning and execution stages of the course. It would be tempting to assume that virtually all upper level courses (especially in relatively small departments) at smaller teaching institutions would tend to have small enrollments. However, such an assumption would be an erroneous one which ignores the wide range of factors that could affect course enrollment. For instance, a new preparation which is part of a required category of courses such as a general education or core major requirement could draw a relatively heavier enrollment since many students use such courses to fulfill requirements. Indeed, there is a significant variation in class size at many teaching-oriented institutions. For instance, in the institution at which I am affiliated, the class size of an upper level political science course can range anywhere from less than eight students to over thirty students.

In addition to the relatively wide range in class size of a new preparation, the approximate size of the course may be indeterminate for a long period of time, possibly even just before the start date of the class. If the class size is indeterminate, it can be very difficult for instructors to take class size under consideration when planning graded assignments, group exercises, discussions, simulations, and other course components. An even worse indeterminate situation is when instructors do not know whether enough students will enroll in the course for the course to be offered. Again, there is much variation on exactly when this determination will be made. It may not be made until after classes will have already begun. Unfortunately, by this late point significant time and effort will have been utilized in preparing the new course, only to realize that the course will not be taught in the current term.

Issues Related to the Background of the Students

Many upper level political science courses are designed with the assumption that either pre-requisite introductory courses or a minimal status will have already been attained by students who will be enrolled in the courses. Sometimes however, various factors related to the context of relatively small departments in relatively small teaching institutions make it very difficult to teach a new course preparation with the desired pre-requisites. For instance, the indeterminate nature of class size may make it difficult to have all of the optimal pre-requisites for a new upper level course preparation. Having all of the desired pre-requisites could mean risking either an indeterminate course enrollment for a longer period of time or risking the possibility of the course not reaching the required enrollment for the course to be offered. Alternatively, offering the new upper level course without the desired pre-requisites could alter the course background of the students who enroll in the course. This alteration could in turn make it difficult or even impossible for the course to be readily assessable to students without desired pre-requisites unless the level of the course content is altered. Depending upon the particular situation, the instructor may or may not determine that alteration to be a feasible one.

Library Resources Relevant to the Course

Before offering a new course preparation, instructors should always examine whether or to what extent the libraries on campus are equipped either traditionally or electronically with resources that are relevant to the course. One should not necessarily assume that such is the case regarding topics of upper level courses, especially on relatively small, non-research oriented campuses. Libraries of relatively small schools sometimes tend to be very well-equipped in a few topic areas while they may be lacking in resources in a wide variety of other topic areas (Durfee, 1999). If the course is a new preparation for the instructor, but not for the institution, then there is a better chance that there will be at least some relevant materials, although the materials will still need to be reviewed. However, if the new preparation either has not been taught in a significant number of years or has never been taught, the resources available through the library will more than likely need to be reviewed and updated well before the course begins.

Opportunities for New Upper Level Course Preparations

Advertising Strategies

Despite the potential disadvantages referred to above, there are a number of potential opportunities and advantages that are often associated with teaching-oriented institutions that may assist in preparing new upper level courses. The first has to do with the various types of advertising strategies that can be used in order to help ensure that the class obtains the minimal number of students enrolled in order for it to be offered. As discussed above, knowing whether enough students are enrolled in a course in order for the course to be taught is crucial to the course preparation process. Spending time preparing for a class which does not “make” is costly and can leave less time to prepare for another class that you may have to teach in its place.

Assuming that the number of majors and minors in one’s department is not too much out of proportion to the typical number of majors and minors in most departments at the school, the relatively small number of students (as compared to larger numbers found in larger institutions of higher learning) in the department can make it easier to “target” the population needed for the new upper level course preparation to reach minimal enrollment.¹ An instructor should begin “advertising” the new course no later than the semester or term before the course will be offered. In courses that are related to the new course preparation, announce that the new course will be taught in a near future term and provide a brief description of the course. Also, try to connect the upcoming new course to topics that are covered or mentioned in current courses that are being taught either by you or another instructor. Employing these strategies can “target” the new course to bodies of students who will be searching for courses to take in the department. Some of these students may be interested in the new course given that they are currently enrolled in courses with topics that either will be further explored in the new course or are related to topics that will be included in the new course.

Further, several additional strategies can be employed during the academic advising time period to market the new course preparation to the “target” population. Sending out descriptions of the new course preparation to departmental student email and advising lists and having all departmental instructors mention the new course preparation during advising sessions can also aid in introducing the new course preparation to students who are most likely to enroll. Mentioning the new course preparation during academic advising sessions can be particularly effective when done in an effort to assist students with either their interests or their need to take courses in a particular category. Notice however, that this strategy of reaching the target population for the new course preparation does require a certain level of collegiality among departmental instructors that will motivate them to promote each other’s courses. Although not guaranteed, since the number of faculty members in most departments of teaching-oriented institutions is relatively small, this could facilitate the willingness of departmental faculty to promote the success of each other’s courses.

Rapport as an Advantage

In addition to strategies that pertain to advertising for courses in order to increase the chances of obtaining minimal enrollment requirements, there are other opportunities presented by the teaching-oriented environment that can aid in the preparation process of a new course. The relationship that exists between an instructor and students could impact various aspects of a course (see Davis 2009 for review). In the case of the relatively small teaching-oriented institution, a relationship between the instructor and many of the students in the new course preparation will often already exist. This is often the case due to the relatively small number of faculty members in a department from which majors and minors have to choose when taking classes. Also, instructors and many students in the new course preparation will have interacted, sometimes to a significant degree, in other settings such as academic advising or through student clubs and organizations that are based in the department. Given the fact that in many relatively small teaching-oriented institutions of higher learning, a very important part of faculty development (in the tenure track process) is having interactions and contact with students both inside and outside the classroom, such prior interaction is to be expected.

¹ Here, I do not intend to ignore non-majors who are both interested in and qualified to take such classes. I merely focus the discussion on those who are easiest to target in order to reach the minimal enrollment.

So, what are the potential benefits of having already established a positive rapport with many of the students in a new course preparation before the course actually begins? If the instructor already has a pre-established rapport with a significant proportion of the students in the course, then it could take a shorter amount of time to develop a rapport with the class as a whole, easing one aspect of executing the new preparation. Just as importantly, if students as a whole are more comfortable with the instructor earlier on, then this could allow the instructor to execute the course with more flexibility and without as many concerns of anxiety on the part of the students. As is common in a new course preparation, the course begins with a syllabus, but rarely proceeds without some major changes or adjustments due to factors such as falling behind schedule or adding topics which should have been initially included. Potentially, the better the relationship between the instructor and students, the better such complications of a new preparation can be weathered by students with reassurance from the instructor. In my Political Psychology course, I had taught all of the students at least once before, and I had taught the majority of them at least several times before. Despite a significant amount of course schedule and syllabus changes, I observed that the level of student anxiety and confusion remained relatively low.

Another aspect of the teaching-oriented institution environment that can aid in the execution of new course preparation is the pre-existing relationship among students enrolled in the course. Past research indicates that when positive rapport exists between students in a classroom, class participation among the students tends to increase (Fassinger, 1997). However, more specific to this discussion, I propose a consideration of the possibility that if many students in the new course preparation will have already established relationships with each other, this may in turn produce a comfort level among students in the new course preparation quickly. The higher the level of comfort established among the students, the better the chances are for success in certain types of classroom activities such as class participation in discussion and group activities. For instance, the students of my Political Psychology class, the vast majority of whom had been previously familiar with each other, had many productive class discussions on many sensitive topics. Having noticed the high quality of most of their discussions, I was willing to give them impromptu group activities and got quality results most of the time. Not only had these students been accustomed to taking courses with each other over multiple semesters, but many of them had also been used to interacting with each other in one of several student organizations that were housed in our department. Therefore, the students' overlapping associations had already provided them with the bases on which to relate and interact effectively with each other in the new course preparation.

Suggestions of Strategies to Avoid Disadvantages and Experience Opportunities

Advertising Strategies and Minimal Course Enrollment

In this section, I present some strategies that can be employed to maximize the chances of experiencing the advantages, while avoiding the disadvantages related to preparing new upper level course preparations that can accompany the environment of the teaching oriented-institution. As expressed above, "advertising" courses to the "target" population in an effort to reach minimal enrollment is probably one of the more efficient ways to reach minimal enrollment for a new course preparation. However, such advertisement should ideally begin almost a year before the new course will be taught. By the end of the semester or before, it is wise to check to see if the course has either minimal enrollment or close to the minimal enrollment necessary in order for the course to be offered. Also, if the number of enrolled students is close to the minimum, monitor the number to be sure that the enrollment does not fall below the required number. If such should occur, then the instructor may want to either re-advertise the class or make plans to teach another course before the beginning of the next term.

Indeterminate Class Size

If course enrollment is small at the end of the semester before the course is taught, be mindful that course enrollment can still fluctuate significantly by the time the next term begins. When planning for my Political Psychology course preparation during the summer before the course was to begin, I worked under the assumption that the enrollment could have been significantly larger than it was during the summer. I kept this in mind when designing course components such as exams, writing assignments, class discussions, and other classroom activities. For instance, I decided that most of the exams would involve multiple question formats (multiple choice, true/false, and essay-type questions) in order to help control the workload involved in exam grading. I also decided not to

include an official “roundtable” discussion component in the discussion portion of the course due in part to the possibility that the enrollment could have increased significantly by the beginning of the fall term. Even a slightly larger enrollment would have made it challenging for the “roundtable” discussion component to work as effectively as I had envisioned.

Teaching Load

Given the heavy teaching load at teaching-oriented institutions, instructors should make an asserted effort to do as much planning for the new course preparation before the beginning of the term in which the course will be taught while still allowing for flexibility once the course begins. Also, if the new course preparation will be taught in an academic term (such as a spring term) in which there is not a significant break between that term and the previous term, then care should be taken to begin preparing the course during the summer term. The heavy teaching load in the term prior to the term of the new course preparation may not allow ample time to prepare for the new course.

Since my new course preparation was scheduled for a fall term, I used the summer in order to make a significant number of plans for the course, while still allowing for flexibility. I put together much of the syllabus, which involved deciding on course policies, course topics, and course readings. Having the syllabus completed before the beginning of the term allowed me to focus on other aspects of course preparation.

Incorporating elements of a new course preparation into other, more fundamental courses of that discipline that are taught in terms before the new course preparation is taught can decrease the amount of time which has to be spent on preparing lessons on those topics. For instance, elements of Political Psychology can be taught through infusing them into some of the core courses (such as American Government, The Presidency, Political Behavior, and Public Opinion) of a political science curriculum (Oxendine, 2009). This process can begin years before the new course preparation is taught. Also, this can raise the level of interest in the new preparation by the time you do get a chance to teach it.

Issues Related to Background of the Students

Before the new course preparation is listed for registration, the instructor should make decisions regarding any desired course pre-requisites or classifications that students will need in order to be in the course. Since Political Psychology had never been taught before in my department, it was going to be taught as a special topics course. Having decided that due to the nature of the material in the course, all students should have upper class standing and should have taken at least one political science class, I decided that an upper level special topics course number was most appropriate for the course. Although technically, there were no official pre-requisites for the class, the upper level special topics course number signaled that the course was aimed at those with advanced standing and previous coursework in political science. The result was that all students who enrolled in the course had the desired upper class (junior or senior) standing and had previously taken multiple political science classes.

I decided that it was not necessary for the Political Psychology students to have taken an introductory psychology course. Of the dozen students enrolled, only one student had taken an introductory psychology course. This led me to spend more time in class going over some of the psychological foundations behind some of the course material. If you decide not to have an introductory course that is related to your new course preparation as a pre-requisite, it would be advisable to integrate the additional time spent on relevant material into the plans of the course.

Library Resources Relevant to Course

Before the new upper level course preparation begins, the instructor needs to ensure that the campus library has an ample supply of resources that are relevant to the course. In order to do this effectively and in a timely manner, one needs to give thought to what course assignments might require access to resources that will need to be made available through campus libraries before inquiring about the possibility of ordering or providing access to these materials through the library. Instructors must be cognizant of the possibility that budgetary limitations may

restrict the amount of material that instructors and or library personnel can add to the library within a fiscal year. Therefore, it is crucial to begin the process of inquiry into library resources well before the start date—at least a year— of the new course preparation. Information available over the internet that is relevant to course topics can offset some of the shortcomings of library resources.

CONCLUSION

During the execution of a new course preparation, instructors typically fall short of their expectations. In order to overcome many of the difficulties associated with new upper level course preparations at smaller teaching-oriented institutions, practitioners need to develop a better awareness of both the potential challenges and opportunities offered by teaching those new preparations at relatively small teaching-oriented institutions. Further, instructors could benefit from being attentive to additional factors such as classroom climate, student performance, and perhaps even mid-course student evaluations as they are executing the new course preparation. A purposeful consideration of the challenges of preparing new upper level political science course preparations at teaching-oriented institutions can decrease the unexpected difficulties associated with the task and increase the chances of executing a successful course for both the students and the instructor.

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