

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Recruitment and Retention at the Department-Level: What Measures Can Departments Implement to Positively Impact Student Enrollment?

By Steven D. Roper

The issue of declining undergraduate enrollments has received considerable national attention over the past decade. The pandemic has exacerbated these concerns as year-on-year enrollments in several states have been severely affected by the pandemic. While this period has been unique, these trends have been a feature of political science enrollments and degrees conferred for decades. The issue facing political science departments (and all academic departments) is whether there are measures that can be taken to ameliorate these national and disciplinary trends. This article catalogs various measures that a department could enact to impact enrollments and major count actively and positively. The list presented is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive; rather, these measures can be used singularly or in tandem. The proposed measures are far-reaching, and some measures would take considerable effort on the part of a faculty and a department to implement; however, this effort should not stop departments from starting significant and meaningful conversations on enrollment.

Over the past two years, my department of political science has engaged in collective soul-searching regarding declining enrollments in our upper-division courses and major. In some cases, we have witnessed dramatic changes in enrollment patterns for upper-di-

vision courses that are somewhat rooted in our declining major and minor counts.¹ While we have engaged

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¹ Over the past few years, our major count enrollment has decreased by almost 20 percent which has resulted in once extremely popular upper-division courses threatened with cancellation due to low enrollments.

in a general discussion about the issue, we have not specifically reflected on the means by which we can positively turn the ship around. Having been at several institutions over the past 25 years, these discussions have become part and parcel of the vagaries in undergraduate enrollment more generally and in political science specifically. As a discipline, we are more susceptible to current political trends including perceptions of politics (positive and negative), the state of the presidency/Congress, and international crises. However, the enrollment issues that our department faces are certainly not unique to our institution or discipline.

Indeed, the issue of declining enrollments has received national attention over the years. The pandemic has exacerbated these concerns as year-on-year enrollments in several states have been severely affected by the pandemic. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) shows that postsecondary enrollment declined by 2.7 percent in fall 2021 with a total two-year decline of 5.1 percent since the beginning of the pandemic (NSCRC 2022). In line with these trends, public four-year institutions in our state (Florida) have experienced a 4.3 percent two-year decline since 2020 (NSCRC 2022).

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center does not specifically report on political science; however, within the social science disciplines² there has been a 6 percent decline in enrollments since the beginning of the pandemic (NSCRC 2022). These declining enrollments are important as they impact the number of majors and degrees conferred. Current data on enrollments in political science have not been published by the American Political Science Association (APSA). Previous enrollment data from the 2010s showed a mixed picture. Jackson (2018) notes that between 2011 and 2016, there was a consistent decline in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in political science. However, more recent research by Smith and McConaughy (2021) shows a more positive trend in political science

enrollments. They report that “when asked about trends between the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years, a full 50.3 percent of respondents indicated that they had seen an increase in undergraduate enrollments” (2021, 360).³ However, it is anticipated, based on the data reported by the NSCRC, that we will see that this rebound will have turned negative in future reporting by APSA.

These contrasting trends have been a feature of political science enrollments and degrees conferred for decades. The late 1990s marked a significant fall in political science degrees conferred but was followed by a significant increase in this metric, which peaked around 2007–08 (Smith and McConaughy 2021). As Rogers notes, historically “degrees awarded [in political science] have followed a cyclical pattern” (2021, 387). Today, we are facing a paradigm shift in higher education in which issues such as demographics, online education, and mounting student debt figure prominently in enrollments.

The issue facing political science departments is whether there are measures that can be taken to ameliorate these national and disciplinary trends. The 2017–2018 APSA *Department Survey* asked chairs in departments that had seen an increase in enrollments to attribute factors that they believe had led to this increase. The single most reported factor was due to “departmental and/or institutional factors” (APSA 2019, 12). More than 70 percent of chair respondents indicated that this factor was positively related to their efforts to increase enrollments. Interestingly, by almost the same percentage, chairs in departments that saw a decline in enrollments reported that the most important reason was the same “departmental and/or institutional factors.” Three-quarters of chairs viewed department factors as the leading cause of either an increase or decrease in enrollments. In other words, departments can have a significant positive or negative impact on their enrollments irrespective of national and disciplinary enrollment trends. Therefore, departments can proactively implement measures to reverse the trends that

² The definition of social sciences used for these data is based on the Classification of Instructional Programs family codes which are an aggregate of fifty-seven subject titles including political science and related subfield classifications.

³ These data are taken from the APSA departmental survey.

we have witnessed over the past two years. Reversing this trend is fundamental not only for the health of undergraduate enrollments but also, in our case, graduate enrollments, as our undergraduate program is a feeder for our graduate program. The knock-off effect on enrollments impacts our graduate program (indeed the anecdotal evidence is that we are already seeing this effect).

I recently began the process of cataloging various measures that our department could enact to impact enrollments and major count actively and positively. The list presented is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive; rather, these measures can be used singularly or in tandem. While faculty colleagues have had general discussions about enrollment with colleagues at other institutions, ideally, we would have liked to benchmark to best practices among peer political science departments. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on the means by which departments have engaged in enrollment issues. While the 2017-2018 APSA *Department Survey* (APSA 2019) asked chairs which factors influence enrollment, the survey did not examine what these “factors” were. This result is not surprising as Knekta and McCartney (2021) report that enrollment issues are often examined at the macro institutional level or micro classroom level but rarely addressed within the literature at the department level.⁴ Therefore, my suggestions below draw on the broader enrollment management literature as well as common sense means by which departments can be more proactive in stemming the tide of negative enrollments and declining major counts.

A Large Caveat

Before addressing suggested measures that a political science department (or for that matter any department) can implement to positively impact recruitment and retention, it is important to note that these measures do not take in account institutional differences (*e.g.*, large versus smaller institutions or public versus private) nor

do these measures reflect different student populations (*e.g.*, first generation, non-traditional or those from diverse racial or social economic backgrounds). There is a large body of literature that examines how key demographic variables affect retention and degree completion rates, and the measures presented here are based on a stylized “typical” student without distinguishing among different student populations.⁵ Where appropriate, however, I note limitations in the suggested measures with a sensitivity toward different student populations. To provide some context to the measures discussed below, my department has sixteen tenured/tenure track faculty with approximately 500 undergraduate majors. The department has a M.A. in political science with 30 to 40 students in the program.

Suggested Measures

First, I suggest that departments create an *ad hoc* recruitment and retention (R&R) committee. Rather than assign the issues of recruitment and retention to a standing undergraduate committee, an *ad hoc* R&R committee focused specifically on issues related to enrollments should be created. This committee could eventually become a standing committee. In our case, the committee would include the director of undergraduate and graduate studies. This would provide a bridge between this committee and our curricula committees as there needs to be a feedback loop between curriculum and recruitment and retention. This feedback loop has been a common consideration in the creation of *ad hoc* retention committees at the university level in many institutions.⁶ Here, I recommend that this feedback occur at the department level. In addition, given the scope of work, the committee should include students in an *ex officio* capacity. A student perspective is vital as we fashion measures to address enrollment and increase student interest in the major. This suggestion is in line with research that suggests that giving

⁴ While there is scant literature which examines enrollment at the department level, there is a literature that explores faculty participation in general university recruitment efforts. See for example, Furbeck 2021; Smith and Harris 2021; Todd and Crofton 2001.

⁵ For an excellent overview of several important retention and graduate rate student indicators, see Barbera, *et al.* 2020.

⁶ As just one example, Kinnick and Ricks (1993) discuss Portland State University’s Retention Task Force and its relationship to curriculum development and curriculum committees on campus.

students “voice” can enhance teaching, learning and curriculum (Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor 2015).

Second, departments need to be systematic when collecting enrollment data. For example while some numbers are mentioned at our department meetings, we have not engaged in a robust data collection effort. This seems quite ironic as enrollment management is very data driven to enable administrators and staff to model (and hopefully) forecast enrollment. One explanation why the department has not focused on important questions, issues, and variables to include in modeling is that as faculty, we may be uncomfortable to determine variables of interest. There is a body of literature that departments and faculty can consult that makes enrollment modeling less intimidating and more accessible to colleagues.⁷ Ideally, the data collection would not only focus the department on variables of interest but identify a time horizon (based on the state of an institution’s institutional research capacity) for collection. These data need to be shared not only among committees but also the faculty. I have been in departments in which as part of the agenda, there was a monthly update on enrollments and major count. Seeing this issue empirically and as faculty assists in placing recruitment and retention in the forefront of discussions and planning as a department.

Third, departments need to maximize student interest and leverage innate program attributes. In the case of political science departments, pre-law interest is a major draw to the discipline, and political science departments need to further develop their pre-law footprint. I have been in departments in which we had a dedicated faculty member who served as the pre-law advisor, which greatly facilitated conversations with students. The clear anecdotal evidence is that many of our students major in political science because of law school aspirations. However, in my department, we have not leveraged this considerable interest either from a curriculum or extra-curricular perspective. We have not developed and advertised a pre-law concentration (whether formal or informal), nor have we considered

activities such as moot court or other pre-law extra-curriculars. For example, Kammerer (2021) notes that a moot court team is an important element in the overall thinking of a department regarding enrollment and retention. In our case, the department needs to develop a pre-law plan that tackles this issue as it so fundamentally impacts our recruitment and retention.

Fourth, student organizations such as Pi Sigma Alpha (PSA) need to figure prominently in recruitment and retention efforts.⁸ PSA not only provides a platform where our majors can recruit those who are undecided or minors, but it is also a component of retention because of the possibility of grants, social activities, graduation honors, and resume-building that provide tangible benefits of the major to students. There is a considerable body of literature that shows that non-academic involvement such as PSA contributes to higher levels of student satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates (Dorimé-Williams and Giani 2022). Not surprisingly, given these higher levels of student satisfaction, extracurricular activities like PSA have also shown to contribute to overall higher GPAs among students (Bergen-Cico and Viscomi 2012). Therefore, investing in extracurricular activities like PSA enhances every feature of student success. My only concern is that PSA requires a membership fee (\$35) which may be nominal to some, but for other students this fee may create a barrier to membership. Therefore, a concomitant organization that is non-fee based must also be created to provide all students access to extracurricular activities related to political science themes.

Fifth, departments need to create course rotations so that high performing faculty teach within introductory courses. We should view these introductory courses as feeders to the major, and thus develop course rotations in which introductory courses are not relegated to adjuncts and graduate students but are incorporated into assignments throughout the faculty (not an easy task

⁷ Perez-Vergana (2020) provides an excellent step-by-step framework to conceptualize enrollment modeling that is instructive for faculty and departments alike.

⁸ Pi Sigma Alpha is the national honorary society for political science students. Membership is available to students at both the undergraduate and graduate level that have attained a specific grade point average among all course work and course work in the discipline. This type of honorary society is found in all disciplines.

to be sure in many departments). Also, for those graduate students and adjuncts who teach, departments need to develop required pedagogy training. This training is especially necessary for newer instructors to ensure that they have the proper tools to be successful in the classroom for their own professional development as well as for potential majors. Related, we need to rethink scheduling and new course proposals based on existing faculty resources. There should be greater emphasis on informal flight plans that provide predictable scheduling for students, highlight popular courses, and ensure that we teach what is listed in the catalog.

Sixth, departments need to view their web page and related social media as essential recruitment tools. In many cases, department information on web pages is woefully out-of-date. Department web pages need to be viewed as a primary information portal that drives students to the department. Enekta and McCartney note in their analysis of retention that students report active use of the department's webpage but that "the students do not always find what they look for at the webpage" (2021, 735). In our case, while our web page is up-to-date, it may not contain information that actively recruits students nor serves to retain our current majors. More generally, we have a limited social media presence which is by far the most important platform we can utilize to retain majors and build community. Our use of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been spotty and developing these platforms would require a re-think and re-branding of the department's social media. Yang (2022) argues, however, that our understanding of social networking sites (SNSs) as a vehicle for retention is still nascent and that these SNSs are a "double-edge sword" when it comes to student adjustment and ultimately retention. Therefore, we still have a steep learning curve in understanding and implementing a social media strategy for enrollment and retention purposes.

Finally, there needs to be a feedback loop to assess whether the measures implemented have been successful and the means by which they can be revised. The nature of the assessment is an open question in our department, but assessment must be included in any recruitment and retention plan. One idea might be to

combine this assessment with the implementation of the Major Field Aptitude Test (MFAT) Political Science. Given the linkage between enrollment, major count, and curriculum, it would be reasonable to include some form of assessment of the above measures at that point. As to the structure of the instrument, Ishiyama and Breuning (2008) note that there are a wide variety of assessment techniques used by political science departments that can be internal (*e.g.*, examining course syllabi for learning outcomes) or external (*e.g.*, exit interviews). Deardorff (2005) argues that these forms of assessment can be used to assist and guide a department in its enrollment efforts.

The proposed measures are far-reaching and would take considerable effort on the part of a faculty and a department to implement. That said, many departments are already implementing some measures so the key is to re-conceptualize department efforts to maximize recruitment and retention. For example, many departments have an honorary academic organization like Pi Sigma Alpha. Rather than viewing these types of extra-curricular activities as simply another department offering and instead thinking of them as enrollment generators is low-hanging fruit that only requires a re-calibration of mindset not organizational structures (Dorimé-Williams and Giani 2022). The same could be said for departments developing an enrollment management plan. These department-level data are readily available but often underutilized for enrollment planning purposes. Other measures such as increasing SNS engagement would require considerable effort to develop-out a robust Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram presence. Departments, like all university organizations, must first think through a general enrollment plan and prioritize the plan based on capacity, faculty interest, and capabilities. Moreover, some departments in larger institutions will have more auxiliary staff available for some of these measures compared to smaller institutions. Unfortunately, we do not have data as to which measures are most impactful on recruitment and retention; however, this should not stop departments from starting significant and meaningful conversations on enrollment. As Enekta and McCartney (2021) note, de-

partment enrollment and retention considerations involve thinking through means by which departments can connect with students and provide community and a sense of belonging. Enrollment management involves a conscious effort to consider student engagement and success. The measures highlighted here provide depart-

ments an opportunity to consider recruitment and retention more broadly as evidence of successful student engagement. Ultimately, faculty and departments can positively influence enrollments and major counts, and as important during the process, become even better departments for their students.

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