Proposal to significantly revise Political Science #230, The American Presidency, to enhance the teaching of writing skills and information literacy

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**Course objectives, how this course fits with the major, and a shortcoming**

Faculty in the political science department encourage students in American politics to take a range of courses covering both political behavior (elections, public opinion, etc.) and institutions (presidency, Congress, etc.). Greg has taught this course every other year, reinventing it over the past 15 years. The biannual course typically enrolls between 15 and 20 students each time it is offered. This course would likely satisfy the criteria for our contemporary social institutions general education category, but the political science faculty has not requested this designation, given that the CSI category is already well represented in this department. Greg recently requested a writing-intensive designation for this course to reflect the changes discussed in this proposal.

In its current incarnation, this course surveys the scholarly literature on the presidency, covering topics such as the intellectual origins of the office, presidential elections, the structure of the executive branch, inter-branch relations (with a focus on how the executive works with the other two branches), and the president's roles in policy making, among a few other areas. Students often begin this course with notions of how the American presidency is significantly powerful, only to find out how constrained the office actually is. This discovery helps illustrate the politics of conflict and collaboration and the limits of power in a separated institutions setting such as ours. American politics students need to understand these lessons, regardless of their future directions during or after college. If they want to undertake campaign work, policy advocacy, or seek public-sector employment, they will benefit from understanding how the federal executive branch functions and how it interacts with other political actors.

Beyond teaching a good deal about the American presidency, this class provides a stepping stone for political science majors who will later enroll in the senior seminar (PS 415). With this in mind, we seek to revise this course to further enhance and emphasize writing and information literacy. Students in this class produce an original research paper. Because this is a 200-level course, and many of the students have not yet taken our department's research methods course (PS 392), they are sometimes only minimally prepared to undertake the paper assignment. Despite this limitation, experience shows that most students are able to craft thoughtful papers and to learn some significant lessons about political science research and writing as part of this assignment. Greg has addressed the research skills deficit by taking a few sessions away from substantive work and turning instead to methodological training. This helps students acquire some basic skills that most of them immediately put to use. It also helps build toward the more complete skill set they will need when they reach our senior seminar. He has also incorporated an instructional session with Chris, in his role as the liaison librarian for political science.

Despite these efforts, some challenges remain. One is what social scientists call the N = 1 problem. Because we have only one president at a time and these (up to now) men are spread out across time, any comparison of one to another faces confounds, as multiple variables differ at once, and we lack simultaneous comparative cases. One result of the N = 1 problem is that the literature on the presidency is rather heavily populated with anecdotal material (some engaging storytelling, no doubt), which is not terribly systematic. Biographies, current affairs

texts, case studies, and the like are scattered densely enough across the presidency literature landscape that students run into them often. In mistaking this material for serious, theory-driven scholarship students end up learning to tell stories themselves, an exercise that political scientists generally do not consider as interesting as good quality social science.

This situation calls for students to learn how to search for, locate, and use theory-driven literature on the American presidency. In other words, students in this course need to develop basic political science information literacy competencies. Disciplinary information literacy skills build upon a base of more generalized research skills that students may be exposed to in Gateway or some other 100-level course. Political science information literacy skills enable students to identify, evaluate, and synthesize literature within the discipline. These specialized information literacy skills can be gained through a combination of librarian-led research instruction sessions, in-class practice with evaluating political science resources, and research paper assignments where these skills are put into practice.

In revising this course we consulted two sets of outcomes / criteria. The first was the Political Science Research Competency Guidelines created in 2008 by the Law and Political Science Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries: ([www.ala.org/acrl/files/standards/PoliSciGuide.pdf](www.ala.org/acrl/files/standards/PoliSciGuide.pdf)). These are discipline-specific information literacy outcomes that are well-suited to this course revision. Second, since this course is being revised in order to seek a writing intensive flag (this request is currently under CC review), and because your grant proposal guidelines requested this, we consulted the criteria for WI courses in the IWU General Education Handbook. Specific criteria, as they relate to course revisions and activities, are indicated in the tables below.

**What students do in the current version of the American Presidency**

In its current incarnation, students enrolled in the American Presidency hear some lectures about various topics, co-lead discussions of important U.S. Supreme Court cases dealing with presidential powers, engage in discussions of readings, present low-level data analyses assigned in one of the course's core texts, and write and present to the class their research papers at the end of the semester. The analytical parts of the course that require students to conduct information searches occur mainly in two places: the small-scale data analyses, and the research for the term paper. In the case of the former, these assignments require students to build simple data sets and conduct some basic correlational and cross-tabular tests of possible relationships between some political variables typically having to do with presidential performance. Instructions presented in the course text direct students to specific locations for the data. Here, there is little chance of going astray in one's search. For the latter, students select a topic of interest to them, and there is plenty of opportunity to go astray in their execution of the projects. Students' shortcomings on the paper tend to occur in one or more of three places: failure to frame up a researchable question in a way that lends itself to crisp hypothesis formulation; failure to gather appropriate data to test one's hypotheses; or failure to conduct the appropriate tests. Solving the first failure is often key to solving the second and third. Greg believes that helping students to identify relevant scholarly literature and building good quality literature reviews goes a long way toward solving this failure, inasmuch as it helps them to gain good understandings of the nature of the gaps in the extant scholarship. Empowering students to apply top-notch research methods is also a challenge. Some of this instruction occurs in the presidency course, though the faculty focus particularly on this in Empirical Political Research (PS 392), and the Senior Seminar (PS 415). Students submit for review some of the sections their developing papers at various points in the term, though in the past Greg has not been sufficiently formal in asking them to respond to his feedback. Further, in

his experience, students tend to write literature reviews that resemble laundry lists more than synthetic discussions of related clusters of writings on a their topics. Writing and information literacy deficits will both be addressed as discussed below.

**What students will do under planned changes to this course**

The current proposal is to focus improvement efforts on writing and information literacy. Three or four class sessions will need to be redirected in order to deliver this new content, including one or two library sessions. Naturally, some of these details will need to be worked out as the course is taught under this new configuration.

Regarding writing, students often lack experience with analytical writing, which hinders how effectively they can write up their tests and findings. Greg has identified exemplary writing samples of both literature reviews and reporting of findings that he will incorporate in the syllabus. These will be discussed in two newly designed class sessions (one on each topic) with the objective of modeling effective writing for students. Beyond these new class sessions, students will be required to revise / rewrite their literature reviews and data analyses before turning in their final products. As part of the revision process, they will also be asked to produce a memo that summarizes the changes they make and how those changes respond to Greg's comments on their first drafts. To provide examples of how this can be done well, Greg will provide them with a couple of model memos drawn from his work as an editor at an academic journal (with identifiers removed).

Regarding information literacy, students need to learn more about how they search for, evaluate, and employ the data sources and literature encountered in the course of producing their term papers. Some specific learning goals for information literacy include learning to tell the difference between  popular and scholarly writings, and learning how to identify and select reliable quantitative data sources. For example, data produced by established sources over long periods of time using either unchanged or little-changed methodology are preferable over single-shot methods employed by an author or organization with no particular longevity.

The following activities will become part of the redesigned course:

1)	**Learning to distinguish between popular and scholarly writings:** As indicated above, this sub-field contains quite a lot of both kinds of writing. Students will learn how to sort through this diversity.
2)	**Learning to locate and select reliable quantitative data sources:** Students will participate in a library session on finding and using reliable quantitative data sources, mainly on-line and print scholarly and government sources.
3)	**Learning how to use different types of publications at different phases of the research and writing process:**  Class sessions on how best to employ different types of literature at different points in the research process. Examples to include: approaching review articles, and writing literature reviews and data analyses.

## Revised Course Information Goals and Associated Activities and Outcomes

**1. Learning to distinguish between popular and scholarly writings**

| Course Activities | -Students read both a popular and a |
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| | systematic treatment of an issue in the study of the presidency followed with a class discussion.<br>-Library instruction session provides a hands-on activity in which students use a rubric to identify popular, trade, and scholarly resources. |
| Political Science Information Literacy Outcome | 3. Evaluates information and its sources critically, and incorporates selected information into her / his knowledge base and value system. |
| IWU criteria for WI Courses | 3. This activity will illustrate how different kinds of writing, aimed at different audiences, serve different purposes. This project will teach students about the conventions in political science writing.<br><br>Furthermore, students will learn to identify authoritative sources over lesser sources, both across types of writing (i.e., elite media versus peer-reviewed scholarship), and among peer-reviewed scholarship (i.e., more influential versus less influential scholarship). |

## 2. Learning to locate and select reliable quantitative data sources

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| Course Activity | Class session on locating and using several different types of data sources, including scholarly print and on-line archives, and government data |
| Political Science Information Literacy Outcome | 1. Determines nature and extent of needed information.<br>4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. |
| IWU criteria for WI Courses | 2. Students will gain some experience in assessing high quality data sources versus less reliable sources |

## 3. Learning how to use different types of publications at different phases of the research and writing process

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| Course Activity | Class session on literature reviews, broad |

| | survey literature, and data analyses |
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| Political Science Information Literacy Outcome | 1. Determines nature and extent of needed information.<br>4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. |
| IWU criteria for WI Courses | 1. The production of this research paper will lead students to write in excess of 20 pages.<br>2. The writing, with two sections being systematically rewritten in response to instructor feedback, will span much of the semester.<br>3. Students will explicitly examine and discuss writing conventions for political science in the course of class sessions discussed above, particularly the literature review and write-up of findings. |

**Conclusion**

The addition of these three new components to this course will require some curtailing of existing material. We are confident this is worth the trade-off, in that students will receive a much improved orientation to and practice in approaching political science literature and information searching. If we achieve the desired results, not only will students produce better term papers, they will proceed through the major much better equipped for later projects, and they will enter the workforce more well prepared to think, read, write, and critically evaluate the large amounts of information they confront on a daily basis.

From an information literacy perspective, this course provides a perfect example of the efficacy of course-integrated information literacy instruction. A major goal of the course is to lead students to think critically about the American presidency and related political science literature. Information literacy skills are a necessary component for achieving this type of critical thought. Students will certainly recognize this need which makes information literacy instruction directly relevant to them. This creates a far better, integrated, instructional model and is superior to merely having a class participate in a library instructional session where they practice searching databases that are not tied to any particular phase of their research process.

Although this proposal indicates significant changes in the way the course's major project -- the term paper -- is conducted, the bulk of the substance of the course will change very little. Because three or four class sessions will be redirected to teaching writing skills and information literacy, some portions of the substantive material will need to be compressed. Greg thinks this modest loss of material is worth the trouble due to the value added in terms of improved writing skills and information literacy.

Thank you for your consideration.