

**Application: 2012 Instructional Improvement Grants
to Support Research and Scholarship Intensive Courses for Undergraduates**

1. **Department:** Political Science and International Relations
2. **Faculty Submitter Name and Rank:** David C. Wilson, Ph.D.; Associate Professor
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4. Department Chair's letter of support, indicating agreement with items 1-10 in the prior section, ***"Submission of a Proposal and Acceptance of Funding Constitutes Agreement with the Following."***

1. Course Information

Course Number and Title: POSC 419 - Foundations of Research in Political Science and International Relations

In an effort to promote how knowledge is generated, the proposed course will emphasize epistemology, and the steps and considerations political and social scientists undertake in designing and planning, conducting, and reporting research. The course will go beyond the current "methods" courses which offer a heavy emphasis on statistical analysis; and, instead will focus on the importance of cumulative knowledge through research, theory, hypothesis testing, empirical analysis, and peer-review. Topics will include research design, research methodology, shaping and framing research questions, locating data sources, scientific writing, and interpreting and presenting results. The course will also focus on the academic profession of political science; introducing students to "why" there are professional fields of knowledge and what professors and researchers in these fields do, as well as how they get there (i.e., graduate education and training). All areas of scientific inquiry and aspects of professional scholarship will be given ample coverage. While the course offers a focus on political science and international relations, students interested in related social science fields (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics, racial-ethnic/gender/area studies) may find the course beneficial. The course is expected to qualify as a Discovery Learning Experience (DLE).

Note: There is an existing Political Science course--POSC 202 (Introduction to Scientific Inquiry)—with a similar aim, but this course is not taught at our Newark campus, and rarely taught at the satellite UD campuses. The proposed course will be submitted as POSC 419 – Foundations of Research in Political Science and International Relations.

I anticipate the course will have five key components (not presented in the order of learning):

1. *The Discipline of Political Science and Related Fields:* introducing students to the history sub-fields of political science, and position the discipline in the social sciences.
2. *Foundations of Scientific Inquiry:* learning and applying the scientific method.
3. *Research Design and Empirical Analysis:* learning the core quantitative and qualitative methods for answering research questions.
4. *Scientific Writing and Presentation:* presenting research in written and oral form; focusing on building and analyzing tables and charts, and explaining them to the public.

5. *Professionalization*: introducing students to the academic profession, including presentations on graduate education, becoming a professor and or professional researcher, attending academic conferences, and teaching, service, and social networking.

2. Course enrollment size:

Enrollment for this course will be capped at 20 students, but future decisions about size will be based on demand. To maximize the effectiveness of the course, there will be two prerequisites. Students should have taken Introduction to Data Analysis (POSC 300), or an equivalent course; and, students should have also completed their second writing course requirement.

3. General education goals that will be addressed:

The proposed course will further at least five of the ten general education goals:

First, the course will provide students with “effective skills in oral and written communication, quantitative reasoning, and the use of information technology (#1).” Students will be required to produce a number of written assignments (e.g., reaction papers, research designs, and literature reviews), and make class and public presentations. Students will lead class discussions, and also work in small groups to discuss and debate scholarly articles. Students will use statistical and database computer applications (e.g., SPSS and Excel) to analyze data, use a number of internet resources for research, and be encouraged to use the Sakai based discussion, poll, and e-journal tools at different points during the course.

Quantitative reasoning will be enhanced through hands-on data analysis, the replication of findings in published research, and the preparation, interpretation, and presentation of quantitative tables, charts, and writings.

Second, students will have to “think critically to solve problems” (#2) when they are tasked with identifying a research question and then designing a research proposal that will help them answer the question (i.e., “make an argument”). All research designs will be scrutinized in writing and in small group discussions, and students will be required to defend their ideas to their peers. They will be forced to deal with their assumptions, the logic behind their arguments, and alternative explanations for their expected results. This process of developing and attempting to answer a research question, coupled with preparing for peer-review will force students to think critically about their research and the issue under investigation.

Third, students will be required to “work and learn both independently and collaboratively” (#3) through individual research assignments and group discussions. For example, I plan to have each student produce a research design that addresses some problem, and then work together in small groups to refine their designs and get feedback. Then, at a later stage, students will collaborate on a class project to address a problem on campus. The purpose of this latter project is to emphasize that collaboration involves shared goals and shared sacrifices.

Fourth, by focusing on scientific inquiry, research design, and the different sub-fields of political science students will “understand the diverse ways of thinking that underlie the search for knowledge in the ... social sciences (#5).” At the most fundamental level scientific inquiry is a way of learning about the social world by gathering information and then trying to make sense of it. Scientific inquiry does not always happen in the same way, nor do researchers always come to the same conclusions, but by following certain steps knowledge can be created and assessed on the merits of the information that was collected. The steps include posing questions, developing hypotheses, designing research through experiments, surveys, case studies, and other evidentiary approaches, collecting and interpreting data,

drawing conclusions, and communicating ideas and results. While studying each of these steps students will encounter the different ways the discipline produces knowledge through research.

Fifth, the course will “develop the intellectual curiosity, confidence, and engagement that will lead to lifelong learning (#6),” by familiarizing students with the professional aspect of the discipline. While the focus is on political science and related fields, students will be able to apply the skills learned in this course to their everyday experiences. Introducing students to the core foundations of political science and its subfields will provide them with a great deal of confidence because they’ll have a stronger foundation for thinking about how politics and government systematically affects individuals and groups. Students will become more sophisticated consumers of political (or scientific) information, and therefore become more aware of the differences between fact and opinion. Also, this type of course should aim to produce more scholars. I anticipate the course will lead to increased interest in attending graduate school, or at least an awareness of the meaning and value of a graduate education. The ultimate goal will be to get students excited about learning by conducting, reading, and talking about empirical research.

4. Student Learning Goal(s) that will be addressed:

Goal A: Students will understand how new knowledge is generated and disseminated through scholarship, and the importance of scholarship to society.

Goal B: Students will articulate a scholarly question; engage in the key elements of the scholarly process; and situate the concepts, practices or results of scholarship within a broader context.

The course is specifically oriented around the concept of discovery learning through scientific inquiry. Discovery learning centers on inquiry-based instruction designed to help students (i.e., learners) discover facts and relationships on their own (Bruner 1967). Specifically the course aims to generate knowledge and understanding through the exploration of a problem of interest to the student, the development of solutions to help resolve a problem, and the development of activities (designed by the professor) that help integrate new information with existing knowledge (Bicknell-Holmes and Hoffman 2000).

The course will require students to articulate a scholarly question, individually and in groups, and address how the question helps solve a puzzle in the broader context of a topic. Early discussions in the course will be aimed at helping students identify their “areas of interest,” and they will become the experts in these areas. The next phases will involve researching the issue, and narrowing their interest to a research question. Throughout the course students will report on what they are learning, and identify data/information that helps them to further address their question. This process will be the driving force in generating new knowledge, and situating their topics in a broader literature on a subject.

It has been my experience at UD (e.g., through work on the “Blue Hen Poll” and undergraduate summer research supervision) that undergraduate students are unclear about exactly what research is, what it entails, and how to do it. Yet, the most surprising thing I’ve learned is that students do not seem to understand why research is conducted in the first place. Even many graduate students find it hard to believe that there is, “anything is left to research;” they point out that why would a text book be written if there were still gaps in understanding. Thus, I will take students through the process of understanding the purposes and fundamentals of social research, as well as the tangible products that research leads to: articles, book manuscripts, presentations and lectures, in some cases, news, jobs, and life satisfaction.

5. Alignment with UD / College Strategic Initiatives

** A Diverse and Stimulating Undergraduate Academic Environment*

The course will create a diverse and stimulating undergraduate academic environment by giving students an opportunity to do hands on research, learn about the different areas of political science (i.e., more than twenty sub-fields), and also gain expertise in a potential career field, academia. To my knowledge there are no courses—or very few—that actually explain to undergraduate students the relevance and nature of graduate education, and the academic profession.

** The Engaged University*

I hope the course will promote an “engaged university” by bringing together students and faculty around the shared understanding of research. As departments at UD, especially POSC, continue to plan and carry out brown-bag talks and public lectures, it is important that students not only feel like they can be included in these events, but that they feel comfortable at them. Hopefully this course will encourage students to become more active consumers of research on campus by giving them the skills and understanding to think about research in a systematic way.

** A Diverse University*

I also hope to work with programs at UD, such as the Office of Undergraduate Research, the McNair program, and the NUCLEUS, to identify students with diverse racial-ethnic, international, and socio-economic backgrounds, and who belong to historically underrepresented groups, and encourage their participation in the course. I have already worked with students and program leaders in all three of these groups, and am confident this type of course would benefit those interested in research, and particularly those interested in graduate education.

References

Bruner, Jerome S. 1967. *On knowing: Essays for the left hand*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Bicknell-Holmes, T. & Hoffman, P. S. (2000). Elicit, engage, experience, explore: Discovery learning in library instruction. *Reference Services Review*. 28(4), 313-322.