

Investigating Gender and Racial Imbalance Among Political Science Majors

A Mellon Foundation Inclusive Teaching Grant Proposal
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Overview

During spring 2018 course registration Professor Abby Williamson's research methods course filled almost as soon as registration opened. Of the 19 seats in the course, all were reserved by male students. This situation resulted in conversations among members of our department about the gender imbalance among our majors. Many of us have experienced similar issues when we review our class lists after registration. For many years we've had informal discussions about how to increase the number of women and students of color in our discipline. However, we have never done a formal analysis of the longitudinal trends in our department. A quick count of our current majors suggests that roughly 29% are women and 14% are students of color, suggesting an extreme gender imbalance and an underrepresentation of students of color. For purposes of comparison, approximately half of Trinity's students are women, and 20% are students of color. We are applying for a Mellon Foundation Inclusive Teaching Grant to analyze the clear gender imbalance among our majors, as well as to further investigate any imbalance in attracting majors of color. We will spend time discussing the issue as a department, researching whether this imbalance is present at peer institutions, identifying how others have addressed this problem, and making some strategic decisions about how we might improve the number of women and students of color who major in political science.

The Broader Problem in Political Science

Political science is a discipline with a significant gender imbalance, as well as a limited pipeline of students of color. With respect to gender, women are strikingly underrepresented in the profession and in tenure track jobs. In 2004 the American Political Science Association, in conjunction with the National Science Foundation, examined this predicament. The report commissioned by the organizations found:

The broad problem is underrepresentation of women in the academic ranks of political scientists in the United States. Despite substantial gains at all academic ranks since the 1970s, women seem likely to remain below parity with men in the discipline for some time to come. A few facts: Women were 24 percent of all full-time faculty in 2001, an increase of just 6 percent over 1991. The percentage of women assistant professors has stalled at about 35 percent over the past five years. Ironically, the overall increase in women political science faculty is largely due to steady growth in numbers of women at the full professor level. More and more women are now hired in part-time or non-tenure-track positions, while the percentage of men in these categories is declining. (Women's advancement in Political Science. 2004. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495970.pdf>)

Although this report is somewhat dated, the problem persists and is a regular topic among women on the Status of Women in the Profession Committee for the American Political Science Association. Interestingly, in 2016 a group of female political scientists created the website Women Also Know Stuff (womenalsoknowstuff.com). The group was founded due to the perception and evidence that women in our discipline are cited less frequently, are contacted as

experts less often by media outlets, and generally struggle in the discipline. To address some of the issues, the group came together to use social media to promote the scholarly achievements of women in our field. The group's mission statement reads:

Our goal is to promote and publicize the work and expertise of scholars in political science who identify as women. Implicit and explicit gender biases mean that women are often underrepresented as experts in the academy and in media (womenalsoknowstuff.org).

Problems are similar, although perhaps more dire, with respect to attracting and retaining faculty of color in Political Science. A group with a similar mission has recently emerged known as People of Color Also Know Stuff (POSAAlsoKnowStuff.com). A 2018 report from the American Political Science Association found that African-Americans and Latinos continue to be “greatly underrepresented” in the profession (American Political Science Association, Diversity and Inclusion Report, 2018).

While our profession struggles with a gender and racial imbalance, our department does better, at least in terms of faculty gender representation. Trinity's Political Science Department is comprised of four and one-half female tenure and tenure track faculty and six male colleagues. Among our four visiting assistant professors we have two male and three female professors. Despite our department's relative gender parity with respect to faculty, our colleagues are sensitive to the gender and racial imbalance in our discipline and among our students.

Proposed Project

If funded, we intend to analyze longitudinal data on the number of student of color and women among political science majors over the last 10-15 years. We will identify how the gender imbalance has fluctuated over time in order to inform discussions on what we might do to recruit more women and students of color to our major. During preliminary conversations we have talked about reviewing syllabi to determine whether there are subtle ways that our gender and racial imbalance is reinforced. New tools exist in the discipline to measure gender imbalance in syllabi (Summer, Jane. Gender Balance Assessment Tool, <https://jlsumner.shinyapps.io/syllabustool/>). We have also thought about starting a Women in Political Science club to support our female students, and/or similar clubs for majors of color.

We would use funds from the Mellon Foundation Inclusive Teaching Grant to have a series of working lunches and dinners to discuss strategies to better support and recruit women and students of color at Trinity. We are also considering how we might work through Women Also Know Stuff and People of Color also Know Stuff to begin broader conversations about how to recruit more diverse students to our profession. Finally, we hope to work with the new VP of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to evaluate our department. It is likely that this new administrator will have ideas about how we might produce better results in terms of women and students of color majoring in political science.

In the end, identifying ways to recruit more women and students of color to our major could help increase interest in graduate study in political science. This could be our contribution to the larger issue we have with underrepresentation in the profession.